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# educational considerations

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## Foreword

# Meaningful Accountability and Educational Reform

Cynthia J. Reed and Van Dempsey, Guest Editors

States have long been responsible for establishing educational standards and procedures. However, in the past decade the federal government has become increasingly involved in defining how schools are to be held accountable. The No Child Left Behind Act (Pub. L. No. 107-110), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), is the newest example of federally mandated "accountability." For example, beginning with the 2005-2006 academic year, all schools in the United States will be required to test students in grades three to eight annually in reading and mathematics, and at least once in grades ten to twelve. This suggests that reading and mathematics are the most important academic subjects and likely implies that federally funded educational research and reform initiatives will be focused on these areas. Consequently, federal funding agencies become ad hoc policymakers, defining policy issues as they dispense resources for programs and research.

Many of the new federal rules defined in the ESEA are already active or are scheduled to be in place for the 2002-2003 academic year. They include redefinition of "highly qualified" teachers; state and school district report cards of students' progress toward meeting state standards; graduation rates; schools that need improvement; students excluded from testing; and mandatory school choice for low performing schools. These mandated reforms pose "substantial challenges for schools, districts, and states" (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). Consequently, some educators and researchers feel that public schools are under attack rather than being engaged in meaningful reform.

The academy is also under federal scrutiny. There have been numerous criticisms of academics and academic publications (Kohn, 2000). Some politicians have the perception that research and resulting academic publications are shoddy and self-serving unless the research results support the federal policy agenda. These same politicians have issued directives about what types of research they deem acceptable. As a case in point, the No Child Left Behind Act frequently references "scientifically based research." In fact, the term is mentioned at least 111 times in this act (Shavelson & Towne, 2002).

The message is clear: Educational reform must be grounded in research. While most educators would agree with that premise, the situation becomes far more contentious when the federal government defines what counts as research. *Scientific Research in Education*, a recent report from the National Research Council (NRC) attempts to define scientific research (Shavelson & Towne, 2002). Six principles of scientific inquiry are stated in this report:

- Posing significant questions that can be investigated empirically
- Linking research to relevant theory
- Using methods that permit direct investigation of the question
- Providing a coherent and explicit chain of reasoning
- Replicating and generalizing across studies
- Disclosing research to encourage professional scrutiny and critique

Scientifically based research implies that all federally funded research must be quantitative and use large databases and populations. There seems to be a narrowly defined research agenda, even though we know that the "business" of schooling is complex. Educational research differs from the so-called "hard sciences." Students and classrooms are not cells in a petri dish. There is great variance across education programs, schools, and communities, as well as ethical considerations when studying children. The definition of scientifically based research does not appear to allow for contextually relevant interpretations or small scale non-quantitative studies.

Education is the quintessential profession based in "blurred genres" of interdisciplinary knowledge (Geertz, 1983); yet some researchers and policymakers tend to see definitiveness and simplicity where complexity, ambiguity, and contextual judgment are the norms for our professional work. We, as a society, must also be careful that we do not, in the name of raising standards, narrow the practices of effective assessment and research, and consequently, the knowledge base of teaching. Kohn (2000) notes: "Once we are compelled to focus only on what lends itself to quantification the process of thinking has been severely compromised." The current political climate and the educational reforms emerging from it suggest that we are well on our way down a misguided path.

A critical crack in the foundation of the current high stakes assessment movement in American public schools is that assessment occurs without a focus on ideas for improvement and what we know about high quality teaching and learning. There appears to be a prevalent belief that if test scores have gone up, teachers are doing something different, and what they are doing differently is good for children. The country is littered with examples of classroom practices that teach children little of value and have marginal consequences for their life chances, but still raise standardized test scores. Conversely, we are too quick to believe that if test scores are low or have decreased, something bad has happened at school, or teachers are not working hard.

The education field, like other professions, should have deep, rich knowledge about professional practice and appropriate mechanisms for assessing those practices. Teaching is a highly complex, intellectual, and demanding profession. We are too quick to judge it by the lowest common denominator (Hilliard, 2000; Kohn, 2000). Judge medicine, law or architecture by the worst practitioners using the most rudimentary assessment practices, and the result may be that anyone can practice healing and that medicine is a profession in peril. Assess teaching in ways

that are as complex as the practice at its best, and the image of teaching is altogether different. The way we view and support teaching and learning greatly influences how others value the teaching profession.

Most testing schemes are not created or implemented to assess quality; they are tools, albeit limited ones, to measure quantity (Hilliard, 2000; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). Standardized testing offers a false read on what teachers do, what we can learn about exemplary practice, and what happens in the best classrooms. High stakes testing does little to inform the practice of effective teaching and learning; instead it offers a superficial assessment of students' ability to perform well on the tests.

Research conducted on empowered principals in south Florida (Reed, McDonough, Ross, & Robicheaux, 2001) found that schools receiving a higher state-issued grade were more likely to offer enrichment and extracurricular activities for students than were lower performing schools. The principals and teachers in lower performing schools instead focused more energy and time on test preparation. Principals in higher performing schools expressed the view point that maintaining a focus on proven teaching strategies would naturally encourage students to perform better on standardized tests. In these high performing schools, the focus was clearly on learning, while in the low performing schools the focus was on raising test scores.

Educational reform is complex (Fullan, 1998; Hilliard, 2000; Kohn, 2000) and involves changing the cultures and practices in classrooms, schools, and school systems. Organizational reforms typically have multiple outcomes, most of which are not measurable through high stakes standardized testing. Standardized tests "tend to measure the temporary acquisition of facts and skills, including the skill of test taking itself rather than meaningful understanding" (Kohn, 2000). McNeil's (2000) study of educational reforms based on high stakes testing in Texas strongly suggests that the consequences of this type of educational reform include deskilling teachers and redefining education, particularly in inner city schools, to focus on standardized test taking. Further, her study suggests that the Texas testing model created lowered educational expectations, increased the inequities between poor and affluent schools, substituted extended test preparation for genuine curriculum in low performing schools, and centralized power in district and state-level educational bureaucracies.

Few would argue that accountability is not important. As educators, we should be accountable to the public, to our students, and to each other. The concept of accountability becomes contentious when defining what it should or should not be. According to Kohn (2000), "A high stakes approach often holds people accountable for factors over which they have little control, which is as pointless as it is cruel." Nearly 20 years after *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Education, 1983), our corporate colleagues have learned that the pressures foisted on educators are based on false pretenses. The political winds have driven us to a bottom line, quantifiable approach to accountability, ironically as corporate accounting – the quintessential bottom line in America – has become vilified. The public has come to realize that one number, or one statistically derived indicator, cannot be used to identify the status of a corporation or business. Businesses are complex, and sometimes short-term profit losses or gains do not tell us what we need to know about the health of the corporate organization. The same holds true for education. Simple approaches to assessing the health of education do not tell us much that is useful.

In this special issue, we present a variety of perspectives about what meaningful accountability is and should be. Further, we explore the notion of what constitutes research that is sensitive to the needs of students, educators, and policymakers. Six thematically-focused articles are presented. In the first article, titled "If We Don't Watch Where We're Going, We Might Not Like Where We Go: School Reform at the Turn of the 21st Century," Dempsey describes the work of a successful school reform initiative focused on the simultaneous renewal of public education and professional education preparation programs. The work of this initiative, called the Benedum Collaborative, is offered as an example of authentic school renewal centered on enhancing educator quality and contextually relevant accountability. Smith, in the second article, "Is There a Better Way? Applying Rules of Science to the Process of Improving Schools," examines common assumptions framing high stakes improvement models for schools across America. In this article, Smith considers research variables, theoretical relationships, and a theoretical critique of whether the current high stakes testing model is appropriate based on principles of scientific research. In the third article, "The Locus of Control Issue in Standards-Based Accountability," McNeal and Christy pose the argument that meaningful accountability is best accomplished by putting more authority, not less, in the hands of those at the building level. This article stakes the claim that micro-level locus of control offers the potential for sophisticated, rigorous, and self-correcting assessment.

The fourth article, "Systemic Violence and High Stakes Testing," exposes the discriminatory consequences of high stakes testing. Watts argues from the conceptual framework of institutional and systemic violence that high stakes testing is a type of violence that has long lasting educational and societal ramifications. The fifth and sixth articles describe alternatives to high stakes testing as models of accountability. In "Taking Control of What Counts in Accountability: The Context Enriched Report Card," Ross, Reed, Kochan, and Madden describe the creation and use of a local accountability and reporting system that serves three purposes: (1) a tool for educators to use to promote proactive accountability; (2) means of fostering ongoing inquiry and reflection; and (3) a means of informing the public about indicators of school quality. Webb-Dempsey argues in "Standing at the Crossroads: Taking the Path of Least Resistance or Forging Ahead Toward Action-Oriented Assessment?" that practitioners should be integrally involved in the continuous renewal of teaching and learning in their schools and in the larger educational community. She suggests that action research is one way to engage practitioners in meaningful inquiry about teaching and learning.

Our country is currently at a crossroads regarding the underlying purposes for education. How we define the purposes of education and the value and role of research greatly impacts the future of education and indeed our country. If the focus is on increasing high stakes standardized test scores at the peril of authentic learning, then rote teacher-directed learning will be the norm. This is a pedagogy that has not worked well in the past; yet it appears to have become re-legitimized and institutionalized (Gold, 2002; Kohn, 2000). Educators are professionals, and our voices must be heard (Reed & Ross, 2001). We know what works – and what will not work. As issues about teaching and learning and how to assess them are debated, conflicts over education reform and the purposes of education will escalate. Perhaps this is a positive trend, especially if educators and other stakeholders begin to consider the possibilities of creating meaningful educational opportunities for all children. We can no longer afford the arrogance of politicians and policymakers who claim to "know best" for others (Reed & Kochan, 2001). Meaningful

educational research must address the richness and complexity of teaching and learning contexts. Our intent with this special issue is to further the debates about accountability so that contextually relevant research-based decisions can be made at all levels. It is our hope that these debates will prepare the way for meaningful accountability and sustainable educational reforms that benefit all children.

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# If We Don't Watch Where We're Going, We Might Not Like Where We Go: School Reform at the Turn of the 21st Century

Van Dempsey

American education appears to be fascinated with educational reform. The 20th century could be marked in school reform initiatives that would note the passing of time as well as any calendar. Cuban (1990) documented this obsession with reform before the most recent version, *No Child Left Behind*, was at full speed. At the turn of the 21st century, we have added a new twist, with the rhetorical claims that school reform must be about all children's success. Previously, success was defined as the right of all citizens to live and participate in the democratic process. Now success has become almost solely an economic narrative with little room left for preparation for civic discourse. While both are achievable (as might be evidenced by the following case study), tensions in the purpose of American public education are turning into fissures that are likely to become catastrophic cracks if not tended to soon and carefully. These tensions revolve around core questions about the purposes and processes of education: Can American public schools create a democratic society that includes a productive economy? Are we willing to give up the teaching and modeling of democratic principles in order to have a more productive economy? Can democracy survive if we do?

This article begins with a case study of a successful school renewal initiative driven by a commitment to the success of all learners through participatory cultures and democratic schooling. The case study highlights an initiative not driven by standardized test scores, as is currently the policy vogue. Along with democratic principles and learning for all, the example presented focuses on the problems tackled by many school renewal initiatives. Presentation of this case study will be followed by a discussion of what the threats are against it, how and why these threats are created and perpetrated, and what could be the potential for damaging effects to public education and civic life in our society if these threats are successful.

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## The Benedum Collaborative

The experiences in the Benedum Collaborative in West Virginia provide a case study of an innovation in education that has had positive results but that is not driven by the explicit goal of raising student achievement test scores. In 1983, John Goodlad visited the campus of West Virginia University to serve as a consultant to a campus-wide strategic planning process that, in part, focused on the preparation of teachers. The strategic planning report included Goodlad's notions of simultaneous renewal through school-university partnerships (Goodlad, 1994). According to Goodlad, the agenda should be an effort to rethink structures for educating teachers by redesigning the nature of relationships with K-12 schools. It made little sense to restructure schools if we did not educate teachers through intensive experiences in those schools; nor did it make sense to educate new teachers to work in old educational organizations.

Since its creation in 1990, the Benedum Collaborative at West Virginia University, a network of Professional Development Schools (PDSs), has been engaged in the process of building a professional culture through partnership. Professional Development Schools are complex entities, generally housed in public K-12 schools, yet organized as partnerships between public K-12 schools and higher education. The premise of our work is very simple: simultaneous renewal of public schooling and professional education programs. We are now one of the oldest school-university partnerships in the country and one of the most successful. Our partnership includes five West Virginia public school districts, 29 Professional Development Schools, and West Virginia University. The work is guided by five beliefs about learning and schooling:

- All in a PDS are learners.
- All in a PDS have the opportunity for success.
- The organization of a PDS encourages all to be empowered.
- A PDS fosters an environment of mutual respect.
- A PDS promotes curriculum and instruction that evolves from continual review and that reflects the school's vision.

The partnership is governed through a participatory process that includes all the partners, focuses on parity and democratic decision-making, and celebrates the ambiguity of grassroots participation and leadership. Partners in the Collaborative share three central ideals about the participation of all partners: PDSs serve as sites of best professional practice; PDSs foster cultures of inquiry where professionals study and critically examine the experimentation and innovation that occur in sites of best practice; and PDSs create empowered communities where all participants share in decision-making about the school and the learning process. The Collaborative strives to meet these ideals by providing resources and support to educators to engage in exemplary practice; respecting and trusting the autonomy of educators; providing meaningful accountability that feeds back into – rather than ends – the learning process; engaging the energy created when professionals build their capacity in partnership rather than in isolation; and balancing fluidity with structure to allow for optimal participation and investment of professional energy.

The work of the Benedum Collaborative is centered on enhancing educator quality. Each of the partner sites spends professional energy analyzing the learning needs of educators to meet the learning needs of children. Educators organize and engage in professional development that builds their capacity to meet the needs of their students. Each of the partners organizes its resources and professional energy in ways



that are unique to the needs and interests of the school. Professional development resources are then focused on addressing those needs by building the educators' capacity to meet them. Accountability begins at the school level with assessment of what children need to know. This assessment is a complex process. However, reduced to its simplest terms, assessment includes determining what children should know and be able to do, ensuring that teachers are capable of creating that learning context and have adequate resources to accomplish this, and then assessing in a meaningful way the impact of this process on the learners.

This focus is essential to the work of the Benedum Collaborative, to what it offers for school renewal in general, and to how it represents a contrary perspective to status quo school reform where educators have, for the most part, been subjects of change rather than agents of change, and the quality of learning and the quality of the profession are marginalized in the process. Renewing the profession does not lend itself to quick-fix strategies and superficial policy maneuvers. Intense, long term renewal efforts, such as school-university partnerships, are innovations that are definitely driven into existence by "courageous patience" (Peters & Austin, 1985). The success of the Collaborative, and many other school renewal initiatives like it, suggests that we take seriously how we support the profession in a public and policy sense. Additionally, it requires us to acknowledge that strategies for renewal must come from the profession itself – from educators who participate in creating their own standards of practice and are then rewarded for exemplary service. Any other course of action is likely to recreate the structures and policies we already have that questionably serve the interest of our children, our schools, and the teaching profession.

In the broadest and deepest sense, the work of the Benedum Collaborative is guided by principles that are not new to education and certainly are not articulated in the "leave no child behind" rhetoric currently in vogue. John Dewey (1916) asserted the maxim nearly a century ago: "That which we want for any child we should want for every child." This element of Dewey's work, so central to his philosophy of American education, begins and ends for all educators and policymakers with two questions: (1) Is this the kind of practice or standard that I would support where my child is learning? and (2) Is this the form of assessment and accountability to which my child should be subjected to generate judgments about the best education? Given Dewey's belief that the fundamental agenda for American public schools is the democratic agenda, and all others spring from that, the fundamental practices of all schools should be to do for every child what we can do for the most privileged child.

### Leaving No Child Behind

The point of "leave no child behind" rhetorical claims is admirable, particularly when considered in light of the experiences of many poor and minority children in American public schools. According to a report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (Darling-Hammond, 1999):

If you are a child who lives in a community where 50% or more of the children are in poverty, you are four times as likely not to have a teacher certified in the field they are teaching than your wealthier counterparts.

If you live in a community where 50% or more of the children are of color, you are over five times more likely not to have a teacher

certified in the area they are teaching than your counterpart in a majority white community.

Children in poverty are 60% less likely to have a teacher with a masters degree.

Children who have a teacher certified in the content area of mathematics score 62% higher on general math achievement test scores and 210% higher in algebra.

The critical challenge that emerges from such data, and what has likely driven the policy machinery behind current federal legislation, is how we maximize our potential to be aggressive agents in the transformation of school for everybody. The agenda for all school renewal efforts – local, state, and national – has to ensure the success of every child in every school. Such is necessary for the sake of our democracy and our economy. School renewal efforts that authentically and successfully pursue this agenda do so when they are focused on the agenda, direct resources to it, and are committed for the long haul. This kind of renewal (over "reform") is slow work, and it takes careful maneuvering and careful decision-making. It also involves risk-taking and pushes the edge of possibilities rather than focusing only on the status quo.

Schools must be engaged in meaningful change before they are ready for meaningful accountability. Deeply rooted issues and problems have to be addressed for such change to be on the radar screen and for these change efforts to be successfully negotiated. Partnerships have required that the institutions of public schools and higher education cross over into each other's space and disrupt the routine – but not necessarily beneficial – practices of both camps. Rather than focus on superficial change with thin results, such initiatives ask tough questions as part of the work: Can public schools and higher education really form a new culture of schooling and learning? Can we change the way we think about the autonomy of educators, leaders, and change agents? Can these be classroom teachers?

Sirotnik (2002) asserts the following beliefs about the moral dimensions of public education that should be "accounted for" in a responsible way. These echo in many ways the reasons why "courageous patience" is necessary for meaningful school renewal and help to explain why the focus for school renewal policy should be as deep as it is broad:

1. Public education plays a vital role in our pluralistic and democratic society.
2. The functions of public education must be construed broadly to encompass the character and competencies of fully educated human beings, capable of filling multiple roles in our social and political democracy.
3. Government and the public have a right to know how well children are faring in our public education systems.
4. Just as educators need to be held accountable, so do policy makers and the public as a whole – for both the validity of the educational accountability systems they establish and the impact these systems have on equity and excellence in teaching and learning.
5. A responsible approach to "being called into account" assumes that public school educators, parents, government officials, and

others want to do the right things for our children, even though they may not always know how and are often overwhelmed by the problems they face.

6. The distribution of resources in response to school – and community-based needs is not a fiscally or morally neutral event.
7. Accountability and responsibility must go hand in hand (pp. 664-665).

We believe many school renewal initiatives, such as the partnership described above, reflect this kind of work and promise in improving public education. Central to the success of our case study is great strides we have made in building school university partnerships by recognizing the "cultural divide" between higher education and K-12. There are tremendous divides within our own camps, and there are divides that can only be seen in the context of the work, such as:

- Negotiating the borders between K-12 and higher education, including merging theory and practice and crossing between the "ivory tower" and the "real world of practice";
- Negotiating the borders within higher education by looking at relationships between four year and graduate institutions; and the cultures of teaching, and publishing or perishing; traditions of teacher education at regional vs. state colleges/universities; professional education as a professional enterprise rather than as a "cash cow";
- Negotiating the borders between elementary and secondary education including the organizational differences and the differences in the treatment of the content-process debate;
- Negotiating the borders between the state vs. the district vs. the school, including areas of curricular change, leadership, assessment and accountability;
- Negotiating the borders of governance and equity, including maintaining parity between public schools and higher education, and respecting the autonomy of each;
- Negotiating the borders of expertise, including questions such as: Who are the experts? At what? Is expertise the right construct for partnership work? Do we have an appropriate form of scholarship for the education profession? How can we wrap the knowledge base around the politics of practice?;
- Getting serious about assessment. Paint-by-numbers assessment is going to produce paint-by-numbers teaching. Is this the "artistry" of teaching we want? If not, how do we assess learning in such a way that reflects the complexity of accomplished teaching and learning?

## **What are the Challenges We Face in Authentic School Renewal?**

One characteristic of American public education in the early part of the 21st century is that the best, most authentic, and change-producing initiatives are not necessarily the ones to emerge from policy mandates or to survive in routine practices. Those in particular that focus on democratic principles, participatory processes, and broadening the agenda and the invitation to success are in particular peril. Sites of best practice can easily become sites of isolation and limited practice when external pressures create low-risk, low creativity drill-and-kill teacher practice. Cultures of inquiry can too readily become cultures of isolation and retraction when they are under constant threat and punitively oriented scrutiny. Empowered communities can quickly revert to status quo when the focus is on professional disempowerment, the elimination of autonomy and professional judgment, creating places where educators are in retreat.

## **Three Key Issues**

Public education today faces at least three key issues that critics exploit to unfairly bash it. These should be spotlighted because they represent the worst of what public education can be, provide the most damaging offenses against children, educators, and our social makeup, and are a serious threat to the best work of partnerships, simultaneous renewal, and school renewal initiatives of any kind.

The first issue is related to the essential role of public schools in a democracy. We are currently witnessing a destructively empty civic discourse about public education. There is an almost complete lack of reference to public education as a foundation and safeguard for democracy. This discourse is leading to increasing distance between citizens and schools, and a subsequent decay of the "public-ness" of public education. It has also helped to propel the centralization of decision-making about what is to be taught and how it will be assessed. Increasingly, these decisions have been taken away from the local level and given to people who have the least civic attachment to the places in which children are educated and in which educators do their work. While government has a constitutional responsibility to provide free public education, it does not have a responsibility to micromanage teaching and learning processes.

The 20th century witnessed the greatest strides in the democratization of our society and the parallel democratization of our schools. Through the first 75 years of the century, America had a clear – if not always well implemented agenda – for equity and democracy through public schooling. Public schools helped to bring down the barriers, but not without costs and frustrations and not without intermittent failure; but the pursuit of that agenda was as significant as the efficiency or inefficiency of the process. The public debate – though fraught with strife – was and is an important element of democracy. Schools that do not represent the hope of democratic life – even where it is difficult to attain – do a great disservice to a society that claims to be democratic and, in essence, contribute to society's demise.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, the educational agenda became almost totally economic, based on a belief that major sacrifices could be made in the democratic agenda of schooling if the economic agenda was intact. We have seen in that same time period a dramatic decrease in community participation in schools as centers of democratic life. Policymakers have been all too willing to compromise the process of participation and ownership in the drive to a false sense

of excellence and achievement. As a nation, we deserve better than a cheap fix with hollow results.

This leads to a second key issue: Standardized measures of achievement for children and practitioners have increasingly become the sole arbiter of quality and success. These are treated as a given now that standardized tests are here to stay and only the educationally naïve invest time envisioning an education world that would be different. If we do not invest heavily in a different kind of assessment of schools and learning, there will be an increasingly lower quality of life for adults and children in public schools. Standardized testing has become a stifling political force. As Sacks (1999) puts it:

How has the standardized testing paradigm managed to remain entrenched, despite the many criticisms against it? Like a drug addict who knows he should quit, America is hooked. We are a nation of standardized-testing junkies. (p. 6)

Sacks (1999) then goes on to cite the following statistics:

Between 1960 and 1989, sales of standardized tests to public schools doubled to \$100,000,000 per year. In the same period enrollment increased 10%. (p.6)

As of 1997, Americans spent \$200 million annually on testing in public schools (p. 12).

Between 1982 and 1994 standardized test sales grew faster than school and college texts, mass market paperbacks, and book clubs (p.12).

Americans take as many as 600,000 standardized tests each year in schools, colleges, and the workplace. (p. 12)

The nation's taxpayers are spending up to \$20 billion in direct payments to testing companies and through resources for taking tests and for teaching to tests. (p. 12)

We live in a time where we judge our educational success with children according to standardized test scores or some other crude indicator of the meaning of education that fails to tell much about children, learning, or educator work. Each year we observe a spring ritual where the most innovative teaching strategies go by the wayside as teachers stop doing what benefits children's learning most to do the things that get them ready for the tests.

A third critical issue is that public education is increasingly being criticized and exploited by politicians who have a tendency to act on superficial information and shallow ideas. This criticism and exploitation tends to: feed the lack of faith in public schools; demonize, demoralize and disenfranchise educators, particularly those closest to classrooms; and increase the shift from public education to other private markets through vouchers, charters, and privatization. These political responses have created concerns about public schools as much as they have been a response to any concerns, and in many ways they have become a major part of the problem. The overemphasis on test scores, a major element of this political ambush of schools, has created a false sense that schools are adrift and ineffective when, in fact, they are simply trying to survive in the crossfire.

Schools have become stuck in their own tracks without any direction to move that would not leave them blindsided. W. Edwards Deming, founder of the total quality management movement, described this distortion of direction setting and goal maintenance as follows:

"You can beat horses; they run faster for awhile. [Such] goals are like hay somebody ties in front of the horse's snout. The horse is smart enough to discover no matter whether he canters or gallops, trots or walks, he can't catch up with the hay. Might as well stand still." (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 117).

In the public eye, schools in many ways get the opposite treatment afforded other professions, particularly medicine. Imagine people on a mass scale going to the hospital overweight, under-exercised, and smoking. Even those without medical education know the chances of their leading healthy lives are remote. The public reaction when hospitals fail to heal them is never to take over the hospital, label them an "impaired hospital," talk about starting charter hospitals, voucher plans for hospitals, test patients on a yearly basis, test doctors on a yearly basis, or dramatically decrease the funds put into medicine because we have lost faith in hospitals. We take it as a given that hospitals work in a social context, and the general context of the person's life is as much an influence on their level of health as anything that goes on in the hospital. Hospitals are not held accountable for lifestyle. For public schools, it is quite the opposite. The public has become convinced that schools are ineffective. There is a belief by some that major segments of our population cannot be educated. This inequity will continue as long as we ignore the social and economic issues that create the inequities and fail to provide resources to schools to accommodate them instead of pulling resources from those schools and children who need them the most. Schools are held responsible for the "treatment" as well as the context for the treatment. Rather than support schools in their 150-year quest for equity and achievement, we hold them accountable for the social structures that have been created around them. Rather than believe that certain segments of our economy place communities, schools and children at risk, we argue that schools have put the economy at risk. In the end, we put teachers and other education professionals in high stakes contexts where we punish them for attempts to be innovative in the face of deviating from the prescribed agenda and likely miss chances to help children who need education the most.

The very things that the political rhetoric touts as a call to arms – excellence in schools – become casualties of the failed ideas that are created and implemented in the shallow backwaters of most educational policy making, done too far away from the context in which decisions must be implemented and made to work. Detached definitions of achievement, of what is important to learn, and how to assess it, break off vital links between schools and their communities. "One size fits all standards and measurements" becomes one size fits all decision making; leadership is weakened; school cultures are hollowed; and schools become less effective places. As Sirotnik (2002) claims:

Yes, the public has a right to know how well our public schools are educating future citizens, but, at the same time, those who fashion accountability systems for schooling must themselves be held accountable for doing it responsibly. It is essential that educators not let themselves off the hook when it comes to ensuring equity and excellence in our schools and closing the "achievement gap." Yet it is equally essential that the public not let our "educational politicians" off the hook with regard to closing the "rhetorical gap" – the gap between what politicians and policy makers say they want for public education and the actual mustering of the will, commitment and resources necessary to do something authentic about it (p. 671).

All of these pressures create schools where the institutional culture becomes increasingly destructive and toxic to the people who work in them, adults and children alike. Deal and Peterson (1999) highlight the characteristics of such schools:

They become focused on negative values; They become fragmented; Meaning is derived from anti-student sentiments, or life outside work; They become almost exclusively destructive; They become spiritually fractured. Education professionals, particularly teachers, spend much of their time and energy being not exemplary and innovative, but being "negaholics" as a matter of psychological survival (pp. 118-122).

The way out may be quite commonsensical and may exist already in most schools, communities, and school districts. I recently had a conversation with a state senator about the quality of schooling and the overemphasis the state places on standardized achievement test scores as an indicator of school quality. He said to me, "Van, without the test scores, how will we know if our schools are any good? How will we protect our children without this indicator?" I replied, "Do you remember what the mean percentiles of your graduating class were?" He, of course, said no. I asked if his parents remembered. He said no. I asked if they even knew at the time. He said no. I asked if he felt abused by his parents for sending him to a school without knowing how they stacked up against other schools on mean percentiles. He, of course, said no. I asked if his parents knew he was going to a good school. He said yes. I asked how he knew without test scores. He didn't say anything. Then we had a long conversation about how people in small towns, big towns, and rural schools know when schools are doing a good job of providing what is most important about learning. We know we can do a good job of creating and sustaining good schools when those schools are filled with talented and motivated educators and supported with adequate resources.

There is no question that most American public schools can be better places for learning, or at least continue striving to do so although they are already healthy learning communities. Even with the weaknesses in some schools, there is a greater threat to our democracy and way of life when the foundational mission of American public schools is challenged. The mission is historically weak at this point in time. Public schools must continue to be nurtured and protected for the democratic process to go on. Lessons about democracy and the struggle to create it are the real achievements of public schools. While we have become increasingly focused on schools as the engines of the economy – a worthy agenda – their paramount value is in their nurturing and sustaining of our democratic agenda. Economic success, and our focus on achievement that leads to it, has to be premised in a set of moral beliefs that are generated in democratic schools in democratic societies. We should see achievement as the outgrowth of nurturing, caring, and innovative schools, and it should be done in a way that promotes democracy first and a sound and equitable economy within that, rather than an "achievement at all cost" approach.

### **The Road Ahead**

All education leaders should consider major changes in the accountability and assessment systems for the nation's public schools. There is no question that moving aggressively forward on creating a more comprehensive and rigorous accountability system would make a major difference in how we support the highest quality schools.

To be effective, the public and the education profession must see new accountability structures as a strategy for improving schools, for supporting the work of professional educators, and ultimately enhancing the quality of learning for children.

The use of standardized measures of achievement as the sole arbiter of quality has narrowed our understanding of achievement, suppressed what we offer as appropriate and meaningful curriculum, and constrained the autonomy – and the creativity, innovativeness, and energy – of teachers. The over-reliance on standardized test scores also has misinformed our understanding of what goes on in schools, led to a lack of public faith in schools, and demonized and demoralized educators. "One size fits all standardization and accountability" stifles rather than encourages the best work of educators.

A newly articulated direction may lead to other significant improvements in the quality of schools, but to do so will require that we think about doing more than changing forms of tests and accountability schemes. Accountability, school climate, and teacher quality are closely linked as factors in the overall quality of schooling, and it is important to look at the inter-relationships among the three as we develop new policies related to accountability. Broader conceptions of how we learn and heightened creativity and innovation in how we teach are vital, and they call for more comprehensive accountability structures and assessments. Such structures– including portfolios, student exhibitions, and student work projects – also give us a much more complete picture of what happens when learning does not occur and how to adjust teacher practice such that we can more successfully meet learners' needs. As Sirotnik (2002) suggests, we must begin to understand assessment as the process of using knowledge and information to judge and understand the learning process and accountability as what we do with those appraisals.

Standardized tests alone cannot do this. Accountability structures must focus on the activities in which children and teachers engage and must be based in the work that children produce on a consistent basis – not just at the end of the school year. Accountability is about how children learn, how we determine what children will learn, and how we support teachers in creating classrooms where children can learn effectively. It is also about providing teachers with the autonomy and the tools to do it and then holding the entire process accountable. Focusing on accountability cannot be used as a substitute for focusing on educator quality. We must be focused on promoting the quality of our educators' work and their professional development as part of our accounting.

In most schools, teachers' and the profession's performance are judged by relatively cheap-to-buy, cheap-to-administer, and cheap-to-score tests. Paint-by-numbers assessment results in paint-by-numbers art. The same is true for teaching. Reduce the art of teaching to aggregate performance on a numerical indicator, and one will get this quality of art.

Our shortsighted understanding of the complexity of teaching, driven by our shortsighted evaluation of it, feeds the public's lack of faith in schools and demonizes, demoralizes, and disenfranchises educators. We get little of value in return. If we were to invest heavily in a different kind of assessment of schools, learning, and teaching could result in an increasingly higher quality of life for adults and children in public schools. We need to know what children know, and what they can do with that knowledge. Children's exhibits demonstrating the use of their knowledge are the best assessment of teaching and learning.

If we continue to pursue the misguided agenda of "ensuring" quality through more standardized assessment, the national crisis in the teacher shortage will become a national tragedy. Fewer and fewer people will want to teach at a time when we need more highly qualified teachers than ever before. We will also tie the lowest common denominator in children's achievement with the lowest common denominator in teaching quality, and when we do, we will probably act surprised when we get the lowest common results.

If we want to tie teacher quality to something concise, let us tie it to the highest common denominator and importance of the job. Set standards high. Support teachers in getting there. Value the creativity and richness of practice that mark our best – and favorite – educators. We must help the ones who struggle, and if they do not improve, support our school leaders in removing them from the classroom in a timely fashion. If we truly want quality, we should use our best knowledge about schools and teaching to do our best work and create our best schools. Quality as an outcome requires quality as an input.

The fact that public schools are more complicated places than any policymaker recognizes does not release schools from the awesome responsibilities they hold in our society. Public schools must continue to be nurtured and protected as cornerstones of our democracy rather than as cornerstones of our economy. Lessons about democracy and the struggle to create it are the real achievements of public schools. While we have become increasingly focused on schools as the engines of the economy – a worthy agenda – the paramount value of schools is in nurturing and sustaining our democratic, community building agenda. Economic success, and our focus on the achievement that leads to it, has to be premised in a set of moral beliefs that are generated in democratic schools in democratic societies. We have already begun to see the damage that can be done when we stray too far from that course.

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# Is There a Better Way? Applying Rules of Science to the Process of Improving Schools

R. Wade Smith

Models of school reform centered around high stakes tests for students and schools are sweeping across the educational landscape of America. All students in the third through eighth grades are now mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) to take annual tests that will likely provide impetus for a radical reorganization of many schools and school systems. A key theme in the legislation is the elimination of the achievement gap that currently exists between students from affluent and disadvantaged environments. Interestingly, the language suggests that educational improvement initiatives should be data-driven and grounded in sound principles of scientific research. In what may be the ultimate irony, it is possible that the entire theoretical framework of the act, and indeed all accountability programs that use standardized tests as the sole criteria for measuring student achievement, are in violation of the very principles of scientific research that they profess to uphold.

High stakes tests serve several purposes: (a) They are relatively inexpensive to administer; (b) They can be externally mandated; (c) They can be rapidly implemented; and (d) Results are visible (Linn, 2000). The last purpose may be the most attractive one to policymakers because of the likelihood of increased scores over the first few years of a program (Linn, Graue, & Sanders 1990). Whether real, sustainable improvement in student learning has occurred is debatable. Regardless of the reason(s), high stakes tests have become a major emphasis in school accountability models. However, it is clear that for any school improvement model to be effective it must be consistently based on a conceptual model and must measure the relationship(s) between the variables to be studied.

## The Issue

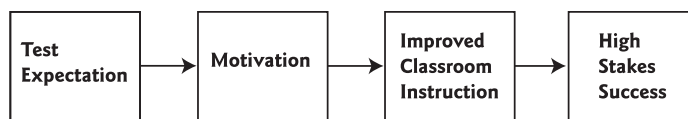
An elementary tenet of scientific research is the identification of variables. This activity drives the entire process of inquiry that ensues. Without a clear understanding of the variables to be studied and their relationship, research becomes a hit-and-miss proposition where serendipity and happenstance are just as likely to produce results as deductive reasoning. If a model of research design is fundamentally flawed, then conclusions drawn from the study are fundamentally flawed as well. This brings us back to two essential questions to be

answered regarding any model for high stakes accountability. Namely, does it accurately portray the relationship of the variables, and what is the strength of the relationships between the variables and the expected outcome?

There are two kinds of variables in a research design: independent and dependent. In an experimental design, the independent variable is manipulated to determine its relationship to the dependent variable. To work backwards from the dependent variable to the independent variable is untenable because one cannot be sure at all that the results are in fact due to the particular independent variable included in the study. For example, one might have an experiment where the relationship between stress and sleep deprivation is explored. In this experiment, stress level would be an independent variable that would be expected to influence sleep duration and quality. If one increased stress levels, it would be likely that a pattern of sleep deprivation would occur. If this pattern were replicable, then a generalized theory for the relationship between stress and sleep might be developed. If, on the other hand, one starts with lack of sleep and tries to conclude that it must be from stress, one is met with a litany of problems. Many other extraneous variables might account equally well for inability to sleep – drug use, pulled back muscle, headache, and loud noises might account for the exhibited sleep patterns. Only by creating a model where the independent variable (stress) can be manipulated and the dependent variable (sleep deprivation) can be measured can relationship be established that might lead to theory development.

Unfortunately, research into student learning typically does not allow for such clean identification of variables as the example given above. Humans are complex, and human behavior typically is influenced by variables that mediate for the effect of other variables. These intermediary variables may exert considerable influence upon the courses of action that are considered and undertaken. Consider the flow chart in Figure 1 that illustrates a hypothetical outcome expectancy for high stakes tests. It is hypothesized that the high stakes test will create a heightened sense of urgency in students and teachers alike. This in turn increases motivation for teaching and learning and improved classroom instruction. If these hypotheses are supported, success on the end-of-year high stakes test is an expected outcome.

**Figure 1**  
**High Stakes Model for School Accountability (HSMSA)**



The High Stakes Model for School Accountability (HSMSA) offered above includes no mediating variables although a direct cause and effect relationship is posited to exist between test expectation, motivation, improved classroom instruction, and success. If the ultimate outcome of accountability models is the improvement of student learning and achievement, particularly for disadvantaged groups, then it is critical to determine if the model in Figure 1 and its hypotheses are correct, both from a practical as well as a moral perspective. Practically speaking, billions of dollars are being pumped into school accountability programs across the nation and if the "medicine" of high stakes accountability is an incorrect prescription for obviating systemic poverty (a keystone of No Child Left Behind), then it is somewhat analogous

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to a doctor knowingly treating a patient with an improper drug. From this perspective, the high stakes outcomes of the law extend far beyond the scope of classrooms into the fabric of American society itself.

### **Variables That Mediate for Teaching and Learning**

Methodologically, an age old question arises when considering the variables in any high stakes accountability model. Namely, are there variables outside the control of the school? Elmore, Abelmann, and Furhman (1996) note:

One side of this issue... argues that schools can fairly be held accountable only for factors that they control, and therefore that performance accountability systems should control for or equalize student socioeconomic status before they dispense rewards and penalties... The other side of the issue argues that controlling for student background or prior achievement institutionalizes low expectations for poor, minority, low achieving students (pp 93-94).

The authors succinctly summarize the debate. For what can we hold schools accountable? Current high stakes models hope, and No Child Left Behind mandates, that schools improve student learning across all social and demographic strata. Data will be disaggregated by race, gender, socioeconomic level, and special learning needs with all subgroups expected to show long-term continuous academic growth. Further, the argument continues, by becoming aware of the achievement gaps, educators will apply appropriate research-based methods to eliminate these inequities.

On the other hand, critics of the high stakes model argue there are variables outside the school's control. Traub (2000) notes that reforming schools in America has been a stated goal since the 1960s, and yet four decades later little has been done to make a significant dent in educational inequality between affluent and disadvantaged students. Payne and Biddle (1999) reported on this phenomenon and document the acute nature of the problem. According to the authors, when looking at data from the Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS), North American students attending well-funded schools with low child poverty would have ranked higher than every country except Japan. Alternatively, North American students in poorly funded schools with high child poverty scored approximately the same as students from Nigeria and Swaziland.

Payne and Biddle observe that well-funded American schools with low levels of student poverty tend to perform much higher on average than disadvantaged American schools consistent with previous research on this issue (Berliner and Biddle 1995). Their observation was not lost on the lawmakers crafting No Child Left Behind, resulting in the call for greater disaggregation of student data. An intent of data disaggregation is to prohibit more affluent schools from masking the lack of progress being made by their disadvantaged populations within the rosier picture provided by the scores of more advantaged students. However, there remain many questions about the degree to which schools actually can influence the academic progress of privileged and disadvantaged students.

Traub (2000) notes that schools themselves may not be a powerful enough social engine to overcome the kinds of systemic inequalities noted by Payne and Biddle (1999), as follows:

School, at least as we understand it now, is not as powerful an institution as it seems. Most children do not encounter school

until age 5 unless they happen to be in an unusually rigorous preschool program. Anyone who has ever reared a child knows how immense and lasting, are the effects of those first five years. Nor is school quite as all-encompassing as it seems: academic work typically takes up only about half the time that children spend in school. And whom you hang out with, both during and after school, can matter more than what happens in the classroom (p. 6).

Although they may not agree in total, Traub and Payne and Biddle both have noted mediating variables in the relationship between schools and student learning. Traub argues that the collective effect of human and social capital over the first five years can mediate for even the most effective instructional strategies while Payne and Biddle note the strong relationship between poverty levels, school funding, and student achievement. Both perspectives offer compelling evidence that a simple, linear model for high stakes testing is suspect. Further support for this conclusion can be found within a social-cognitive view of learning and motivation.

### **Relation of Self-Beliefs to Learning**

From a social-cognitive perspective, self-efficacy is an important variable expected to act as a mediating variable in Figure 1. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy refers to one's ability to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments. These beliefs have a broad influence upon courses of action people choose to pursue, how long they will persevere, amount of effort expended upon a task, resiliency to adversity, the role one's thoughts play in hindering or aiding goal attainment, levels of stress, and, ultimately, levels of accomplishment. Clearly one's personal self-efficacy for academic achievement would be expected to play a powerful mediating role in the ultimate level of academic success experienced.

From a social-cognitive perspective, motivation can be understood as a function of one's general beliefs about his or her competence for a task. If a person believes s/he has adequate ability to perform a task, failure is likely to be ascribed to lack of organization, effort, or the like. Typically, people with these beliefs are likely to make adjustments in their original area of deficiency and retry the task. On the other hand, if a person believes failure at a task is due to insufficient ability, there is a high likelihood they will shut down more quickly, expend less energy, and become resigned to failure more easily (Bandura 1997).

Development of cognitive competencies is most likely through sustained involvement in appropriate activities. These activities are most effective when they integrate mastery experiences into an environment that fosters creation and implementation of challenging self-set goals (Bandura, 1997). The vast differences in social and human capital that exist in students from varying backgrounds seems to require a contextualized curriculum grounded in social constructivist principles or these teaching methods (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). High stakes tests are generally not sensitive to this issue. If the tests act as a screening agent for deficiencies in social and human capital among students, then it is likely that a long-term result will be the further Balkanization of students. If this Balkanization occurs, it would be ironic that the reform program designed to eliminate the achievement gap perpetuated it instead.

Human and social capital, school spending, student self-efficacy, and personal motivation are just four of many variables that have a mediating effect upon teaching and learning. From the perspective of

a school-related variable, quality of instruction must be considered central to any efforts to improve student learning. Hallinger and Heck (1996) report that teachers contribute the greatest variance in student achievement. In another twist of irony, it is possible that a technical rational reform model such as the HSMSA may lower the quality of instruction within many classrooms. Popham (2001) and Darling-Hammond (1991) have both argued elegantly that high stakes tests tend to narrow the curriculum and stifle the enriched learning activities that are most likely to provide meaningful opportunities for enactive mastery experiences and self-directed learning. If this is the case, then it is reasonable to conclude that teaching skills may be supplanted by "teacher proof" curricula that de-emphasize teacher input.

Any discussion of a high stakes testing model would be incomplete without an analysis of the validity of the whole process. High stakes proponents argue that the tests serve as a tool for parents and teachers, offering information regarding what their students know and can do (No Child Left Behind, para. 3). Critics of high stakes testing note that this may be the stated purpose of the tests, but that the reality might be quite different. For example, Freeman et al. (1984) reported that every standardized test used at that time included material that was not covered by any appropriate textbook 50% of the time. In some cases more than 80% of the information was not covered in any meaningful fashion. Admittedly, this study is close to twenty years old. However, few, if any, states with high stakes testing have undergone the rigorous process of validating items and item content with actual textbook information. Even if state leaders were to align the tests with the curriculum, one is still faced with the conundrum of reducing a year's worth of instruction in a content area to a test that typically lasts approximately half a day.

The questions raised to this point can be argued to be speculative. We have just entered the national phase of high stakes testing, and data are only beginning to emerge; but there is historical evidence that can be used to inform us of possible consequences. Linn (2000) addresses the historical evidence about high stakes testing:

As someone who has spent his entire career doing research, writing, and thinking about educational testing and assessment issues, I would like to conclude by summarizing a compelling case showing that the major uses of tests for student and school accountability during the past 50 years have improved education and student learning in a dramatic way. Unfortunately, I cannot. Instead, I am led to conclude that in most cases the instruments and technology have not been up to the demands that have been placed on them by high stakes accountability. Assessment systems that are useful monitors lose much of their dependability and credibility for that purpose when high stakes are attached to them. The unintended effects of high stakes accountability uses often outweigh the intended positive effects (p.14).

## Conclusions

Current conceptualizations of high stakes models for student accountability appear to overlook several factors that are critical to creating an effective teaching and learning environment for all students. Variables defined in the model do not account for powerful factors known to mediate for student achievement. Omission of these variables renders the theoretical model overly simplistic and inadequate to understand the relationship between school-related outcomes and student learning. The model also places too much emphasis upon a single high stakes test as an accurate barometer of how much learning has occurred. Such a practice is not best suited to gauging

learning over time, is not particularly sensitive to gaps in human and social capital, and is known to create a "teach to the test" mentality among teachers. Using a student's results on a high stakes test as a proxy measure for teacher effectiveness may further exacerbate critical shortages of teachers in low performing schools. Even when gains are demonstrated via high stakes tests, history demonstrates these gains are transient and regression towards the mean typically occurs within a few years after initial testing occurs. Finally, the social and economic forces behind high stakes testing may Balkanize America's educational systems and widen the divide between advantaged and disadvantaged school systems and students within these systems.

Current efforts at school accountability, with an emphasis upon high stakes testing, appear to be grounded in a questionable theoretical model that is insensitive to many important variables that affect student success. Such a theoretically impaired model should not be allowed to hold sway, particularly given the potential impact to be felt in schools dealing with high levels of student poverty. Rules of science and the moral implications of implementing a well-intentioned, but ill-conceived, high stakes testing program demand more than what is accounted for in this simplistic model.



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# The Locus of Control Issue in Standards-Based Accountability

Larry McNeal and  
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Many states have developed complex approaches to standards-based accountability because both policymakers and educators recognize that accountability requires credible assessment tasks – tasks that clearly reflect the language of the standards and that articulate good classroom instruction. Additionally, these tasks must integrate local and state data to determine what is effective in promoting successful student outcomes. Some states are using a range of measures to gauge student outcomes because it is difficult to build an assessment system that is sufficiently reliable for making high-stakes decisions about school districts, schools, and students. An effective state-designed standards-based accountability system must then focus resources and policy to insure that assessment at the microlevel is sophisticated, rigorous, and self-correcting. Those goals are best accomplished by placing more authority, not less, in the hands of those who interact the most frequently with students. Locus of control at the microlevel must be the credo of an effective standards-based assessment system. Standards are implemented and institutionalized at this level; therefore they should originate at this level.

## The Move to Standards-Based Accountability

Accountability has come to dominate the discourse about schools and their accomplishments. The discourse has arisen out of America's fascination with holding the public education system accountable for its outcomes. This current wave of accountability has its roots in the "historical turning point" of the Soviet Union launching of the first space ship in 1957 when the belief arose that American students were falling behind their counterparts in other countries (Bybee, 1997). It was at this juncture that policymakers began to "perceive the United States as scientifically, technologically, militarily, and economically weak." (Bybee, 1997, par.2). This brought into question whether or not the American educational system had the capacity to provide direction and motivation to students, parents, teachers, and others to help students learn the skills needed to succeed both in school and in life after school. It was also at this juncture where state and federal policymakers became more actively engaged in the conduct of education, including advocacy for the increased use of standardized tests to assess school learning.

According to Linn (2000), the belief that students in the United States were falling behind other countries led policymakers by the 1970s

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to instigate a minimum competency testing approach to improve public education. States began to rely on tests of basic skills to ensure, in theory, that all students would learn at least the minimum needed to be productive citizens. Florida was one of the states that implemented a statewide minimum competency test that students were required to pass prior to graduation. The early gains in test scores that Florida experienced were used as an example of how standards and accountability systems could improve education. Other states followed Florida's lead and implemented minimum competency testing programs. States also followed Florida's shift away from minimum competency testing when test score gains reached a plateau and differential pass rates and increased dropout rates among ethnic minorities and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were discovered. In the 1980s, the minimum competency test approach was almost entirely discarded because of the concern that it promoted low standards. In many schools, the content of these tests became the maximum in which students became competent, and this was widely perceived as weakening the content learned in schools as demonstrated by the fact that the "average achievement of high school students on most standardized test was lower than when Sputnik had been launched." (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*. In the report, the Commission called for an end to the minimum competency testing movement and fostered the beginning of a high-stakes testing movement that would raise the nation's standards of achievement drastically. The report triggered a nationwide panic regarding the shortcomings of the American education system. The description of poor student performance on basic skills and knowledge tests, low levels of student achievement, and low rates of adult literacy, in comparison to international counterparts, resonated with the American public. Many were convinced that some schools in the United States were performing poorly and that the United States was in jeopardy of losing its global standing.

The shortcomings identified in the report resulted in many state governments taking a more active role in developing a better understanding of how students perform and schools operate. This led to the establishment of student-learning standards at the state level aligned with accountability systems and more state control over public education (The Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment, 2001). The belief was that students would be motivated to learn; school personnel would be forced to do their jobs; and the condition of education would inevitably improve – without much effort and without great cost to the state. What made sense in theory gained widespread attention and eventually increased in popularity as a method for school reform.

## The Standards-Based Accountability Approach

In the ensuing two decades since *A Nation at Risk*, many states have recalibrated their educational accountability systems as they first moved the focus from school district accountability to building-based accountability and then to student accountability in the drive to improve student outcomes. In most states, accountability measures that assess students' progress were attached to school reform legislation in order to hold schools, administrators, teachers, and students accountable for meeting newly imposed standards in core subjects. State policymakers in every state:

[but] Iowa... have academic standards in at least some subjects; 50 test how well their students are learning; and 27 hold schools

accountable for results, either by rating the performance of all schools or identifying low-performing in an attempt to find the most effective way to improve student achievement (Quality Counts 2001, p. 1).

The standard-based assessment approach incorporates several purposes and characteristics. According to Bond and Roebber (1996), the purposes of standards-based accountability are to improve "instruction and curriculum, program evaluation, school performance reporting, student diagnosis or placement, high school graduation, and school accreditation." Claycomb and Kysilko (1997) point out that the standards-based accountability system has the following characteristics in common. The characteristics are:

[A]n alignment with rigorous standards, a design that will address specific goals and purposes, a balance between validity, reliability, and efficiency, a process for informing instruction with consequences, an array of mechanisms to encourage schools and districts to align their instruction and evaluation with standards, and a clear articulation national measures of student performance (p. 5).

The standards-based accountability approach to enhance student performance is an indication that state policymakers are developing a better understanding of how students perform and schools operate to promote student outcomes. This trend has resulted in the establishment of new and interesting standards-based accountability systems with an array of different kinds of measures to ensure that student-learning standards are met.

The "most widely used assessment measures" are norm-referenced tests that compare individual student performance against the performance of a representative national sample of similar students; criterion-referenced tests that compare individual student performance to clearly defined standards; multiple-choice assessments; and performance-based assessments that require individual students to formulate an original response to a question and to communicate that response through the performance of some act (Claycomb & Kysilko, 1997). Many standards-based accountability systems use a variety of the assessment measures identified above to monitor student achievement, with most using both norm-referenced tests and criterion-referenced tests to measure the performance of their students.

### **The Macro and Micro Environment of Standards-Based Accountability**

In linking accountability to assessment, policymakers borrowed principles from the business sector, and now the educational system of the United States is being transformed into a standards-based system that is built on measurable outcomes rather than compliance with rules and regulations. There are, however, difficulties associated with standards-based accountability systems. The difficulties arise out of the environments where standards-based accountability systems are designed, promulgated, implemented, and institutionalized. The environments are the macro-environment of state government and micro-environment of the local schools. Both environments can lay a claim for being the locus of control for school improvement, but only one has the power to exercise that control.

State-derived accountability, which has become the primary means by which school reform is designed and promulgated, is a macro-environmental based model. Embedded in the macro-environment

are the educational norms, expectations, and values of the larger community of stakeholders filtered through a political lens. The locus of control in the macro-environment is at the level where change can be mandated. Determinations about the design and promulgation of standards-based accountability emerge through the political process and flow downward to local schools. Local schools are then expected to implement and institutionalize standards-based accountability initiatives.

Implementation and institutionalization of state designed accountability is the primary means by which the school actualizes reform. The implementation and institutionalization is at the micro-environmental level. Embedded in the micro-environment are the educational norms, expectations, and values of local stakeholders. Collectively, these norms, expectations, and values define the educational programs and services provided by local schools in a community. They also define the issue of locus of control within a political-social-economic framework that is local in nature, and it is from this framework that school improvement originates. As an organization changes, in response to stimuli in its environment, it attempts to realign itself in ways that facilitate the accomplishment of its goals. The impetus for this response is the involvement of local stakeholders who represent the norms, expectations, and values of the local educational community. For standards-based accountability to be effective, it must manifest from within the micro environment first and move upward through state departments of education.

As previously mentioned, there are problems with standards-based accountability systems arising from the environments in which state departments of education and local schools exist. The first problem occurs at the macro-environment level. This is the level where standards-based accountability approaches are designed and promulgated by state policymakers. One might say that policymakers at this level have the tendency to perceive standards-based accountability as a concert performance of Mozart's *Fifth Symphony* where the melody appears to flow as beautifully as water gliding over small stones in a high mountain brook. The dilemma with this viewpoint is that state designed standards-based accountability systems are usually extremely complex. These systems involve a range of interconnected design and technical issues ranging from test validity, incentives, and sanctions to how the outcomes will be used to improve the learning processes of students. The design and promulgation process is further complicated by the need of state policymakers to resolve other pertinent issues such as identifying the performance measurements to be used, subject matters to be tested, grade levels to be tested, types of student to be tested, acceptable level of performance, and consequences for failure or success. The end result is not a universal version of Mozart's *Fifth Symphony* from each state but fifty distinct variations of standards-based accountability that have been filtered through the political process and that are then passed on to schools to implement and institutionalize. A challenge for the state is overcoming the design and technical issues along with the pertinent issues that hinder policymakers' willingness or ability to share the locus of control for improving schools with local school stakeholders.

The second problem is at the micro-environment level. This is the level where standards-based accountability approaches are implemented and institutionalized. The dilemma is that full implementation of state designed standards-based accountability systems is neither embraced nor institutionalized in public schools. Furthermore, the implementation and institutionalization processes are complicated by the failure of both

state and local policymakers to understand the local school's capacity to respond to change, especially change that is external and top-down. The standards-based accountability approach is a change process for holding local schools, administrators, teachers, and students accountable for meeting newly imposed standards. To a lesser degree, it is also an approach for holding state policy makers accountable for improving educational outcomes. To offer another metaphor, at the micro-environment level, standards-based accountability can be perceived as a rock band's version of Tina Turner's *Proud Mary, Keep On Rolling*, where the music starts out slow and goes almost into a gentle whisper before the melody picks up speed and the rhythm becomes overwhelming and almost impossible to dance to (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). A challenge for schools is building the capacity to respond to external and top-down mandated change while at the same time changing the locus of control for improving schools.

### Summary

In considering how change occurs in complex organizations, it is apparent that it occurs simultaneously in the macro-environment and micro-environment but not necessarily as a symphony performing Mozart's *Fifth Symphony* nor a rock band performing Tina Turner's rendition of *Proud Mary, Keep On Rolling*. Rather, change occurs as a musical mosaic that has a melody and rhythm that ebbs and flows depending on what is needed and who has the capacity to make it happen. It is also the duality of change in complex organizations where the locus of control for improving local schools has switched from the micro-environment to the macro-environment that makes successful implementation and institutionalization of standards-based accountability so unpredictable.

Change theory is consistent about the effectiveness of change arising out of the micro-environment versus change arising from the macro-environment (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991, p. 5). In considering how change occurs in complex organizations, such as schools, it is important to remember "even moderately complex changes take from three to five years, while major restructuring efforts can take five to ten years." (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 10). Standards-based accountability is, at the minimum, a moderately complex change which requires a major commitment of organizational resources in order to be successful. The success of the standards-based accountability approach will not be determined at the macro environment level but at the micro environment level where it has to be implemented and institutionalized. Success then is a function of the responses of individual stakeholders at the micro environment who have the responsibility of prioritizing and integrating innovations within the organization. The chance for successful implementation and institutionalization increases when an innovation originates in the same environment in which it has to be implemented and institutionalized.

The standards-based accountability approach means that the conceptualization of the school improvement process is subjected to competing visions of what works and why it works. Sarason (1990) describes this as "a conceptual cloud chamber (p. 33)." Therein lies the biggest challenge. This implies that state designed standards-based accountability initiatives are by their very being born into conflict because of the issue of local control. How stakeholders in the macro and micro-environments resolve this issue will determine whether or not the standards-based accountability approach is the panacea for school improvement or just another failed educational innovation.

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# Systemic Violence and High Stakes Testing

Ivan E. Watts

The use of high stakes testing as the primary tool of school reform is sweeping the nation. Proponents of standardized tests, including most state legislatures, the President, governors, boards of education and even the American Federation of Teachers, have embraced the rhetoric of higher and tougher standards. Of course, no one advocates for low standards, but the movement towards test standardization is terribly flawed and will not fix our failing schools. Many scholars, teachers, parents and administrators believe that high stakes testing is actually undermining efforts to attain quality teaching and learning in public schools (Ross, 1999). Rather than focus on strategies that have proven to increase student achievement, such as smaller class size, more time for teacher planning, and equitable resources for all schools, politicians, test-makers, and policymakers have imposed more standardized tests on students without providing any evidence that testing improves teaching or learning (Kohn, 2000).

The use of high stakes tests is not new, and the effects of these tests are not always beneficial. The consequences associated with test results have long been a part of America's educational and selection process. For example, in the early part of the 20th century scores from standardized tests taken by prospective immigrants could result in entrance to or rejection from the United States. In the public schools, test scores could uncover talent, provide entrance into programs for the gifted, or as easily, provide evidence of deficiencies, leading to placement in vocational tracks or even in to institutions for the mentally ill and feeble-minded. Test scores could also mean the difference between acceptance into or rejection from the military (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). As will be discussed in this article, standardized test scores are also used to confirm and validate the superiority or inferiority of various races, ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and social classes. This discussion of high stakes testing will be examined within the theoretical framework of institutional and systemic violence which critically scrutinizes the use of standardized test scores to validate and maintain discrimination along racial, ethnic, and class lines.

The purpose of this article is to critically explore the highly controversial issue of high stakes testing. In this article, it is my intention to expose some of the discriminatory consequences of high stakes testing manifested throughout this nation. Some of these consequences will be discussed in the context of human and civil rights violations. Once an understanding of the uses of high stakes has been established, the theoretical framework of institutional and systemic violence will be utilized to support the hypothesis that high stakes testing is a type of violence that has long-lasting educational and societal ramifications.

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## High Stakes Testing

In recent decades, test scores have come to dominate the discourse about schools and their accomplishments. Test scores can even influence the important decisions made by families, such as where to live and where to send their child(ren) to school. According to Haladyna, Nolen, and Haas (1991), real estate agents use school test scores to rate neighborhood quality, affecting property values by up to \$10,000. At the national, state, and local levels, test scores are being used to evaluate programs and allocate educational resources. Some states even provide merit pay to administrators and teachers if students meet or exceed national averages. Many states also offer scholarships to students who score well on national standardized tests. For example, in 2000, Michigan implemented the Merit Award Scholarship program in which over 42,000 students who performed well on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program high school tests were rewarded with scholarships of \$2,500 or \$1,000 to help pay for in-state or out-of-state college tuition (Durbin, 2001). In addition, 1,346 California city school teachers and administrators demonstrating the greatest improvements in test scores over a two year period were to share \$100 million in bonus rewards, ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000 per teacher, through Certificated Staff Performance Incentive Bonuses (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). It is clear that millions of dollars now hinge on the test scores of students.

Our current confidence in and reliance on tests scores dates back to the Soviet Union's ability to launch Sputnik into space before the United States, causing state and federal politicians to question the quality and rigor of instruction provided by America's schools. Later, in the 1970s, the belief that the achievement of students in U.S. schools was falling behind other countries led state and local policymakers to establish minimum competency testing (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). States began to rely heavily on basic skills tests to ensure, at least in theory, that all students would learn the minimum skills and information needed to be a productive citizen. Florida was one of the first states to implement a minimum competency test for their students, with minimal gains. Students there were required to pass this test prior to high school graduation. After experiencing modest increases in students' scores, the perceived gains hit a plateau. This leveling off allowed differential pass rates and an increase in dropout rates among ethnic minorities and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to surface. As a result, Florida's testing policy was postponed as it was widely perceived that minimum competency tests were "dumbing down" the content in schools (Linn, 2000).

Minimum competency testing was resurrected in 1983 when the National Commission on Education released *A Nation at Risk*, an influential report on the state of education in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). According to Kohn (2000) and Berliner and Biddle (1995), this extensive report put an end to minimum competency testing and introduced the high stakes testing movement raising the nation's standards of achievement drastically. The Commission reported that schools in the United States were performing poorly in comparison to other countries and that the country was in jeopardy of losing its global standing, triggering a nationwide panic regarding the weakening condition of the American education system (Kozol 1991). In spite of criticisms of inaccuracy and lack of scholarly rigor, *A Nation at Risk* brought about massive calls for reform, advocating for rigorous standards and accountability processes. The Commission recommended that all states implement

high standards and that those standards be assessed through high stakes testing where schools would be held accountable.

Nearly every state in the country instituted high educational standards and assessment policies to meet those standards. To ensure positive results, state policymakers attached incentives for high performance as well as sanctions for poor performance on the tests. In other words, schools with high test scores would be rewarded and underperforming schools would be penalized (Quality Counts, 2001). The rationale that fueled this line of reasoning was that once poor performing schools knew their status, students would be motivated to learn and school personnel would be forced to do their jobs, rather than face further penalties, thereby improving themselves without much to the state. This reform strategy made sense on its face, and it gained popularity throughout the country. However, what policymakers did not anticipate was that the incentives for schools to set and meet those high standards would also widen the educational achievement gap along racial, ethnic, ability, and class lines.

The more high stakes testing gains momentum, the more salient differential patterns of test scores become. When the majority of underperforming schools are significantly populated by poor, African American, and Latino students (Kohn 2000; Noguera 2002), violence is occurring. In this case, the violence that targets marginalized groups is called systemic violence. This article illustrates how high stakes testing is a form of systemic violence.

### **Systemic Violence and High Stakes Testing**

What is violence? Newton Garver (1968) states that violence, "occurs in several markedly different forms, and can be usefully classified into four different kinds based on two criteria, whether the violence is personal or institutionalized, or whether the violence is overt or covert and quiet" (20). The most recognizable form of violence is overt personal violence such as murder, rape, and assault. However, the least recognized form of violence in our culture is systemic or institutionalized, which is covert and quiet. Violence can occur at the institutional level as well as at the individual level. The military, police, church, and educational system are cultural institutions that are capable of using force in the name of the public good. These institutions may even go beyond force to violence that instead undermines the public good (Curtin & Litke 1999). For example, the development and implementation of high stakes testing in nearly every state in the United States was intended to produce higher standards. Yet, to achieve these standards students were forced to take an examination where the scores highlighted the perceived educational inferiority of students of color and the poor. Systemic violence occurs when these disparities are allowed to continue, and students are penalized by not being allowed to graduate or being retained in earlier grades.

Violent institutions, such as the military, do exist within our society; however, this article is written to expose the institutionalization of systemic violence by our society, specifically our educational system. Overt acts of violence may be committed against individuals, such as murders by lynching or late night shootings in ghetto alleys, whereas systemic violence is the covert infliction of violence, the violence that draws no blood – yet goes to the heart (Ginsberg 1999). Drawing from this alternative definition of violence, violence can be done even though no one raised a hand to another. Since there may be no evidence of an overt act of violence, a perpetrator, or victim, one may be inclined to conclude that no harm has been done. This veil of self-deception enables the institutionalization of

systemic violence, allowing violence to be concealed. For example, the American Evaluation Association (2001) has reported that high stakes testing often leads to educationally unjust consequences and unsound practices, even though it occasionally shows modest improvements in the teaching and learning conditions in some classrooms and schools. What is most concerning are the increases in dropout rates among African Americans, Latino Americans and the poor. At the same time, teachers and administrators become deprofessionalized by a singular focus on testing, loss of curricular integrity, increased cultural insensitivity, and the disproportionate allocation of educational resources into testing programs. The concealed acts of violence that high stakes testing perpetrates are so detrimental and compelling that the American Evaluation Association (2001) does not support test-driven accountability.

The institutionalization of systemic violence has countless perpetrators but as a collective, it is faceless. Systemic violence includes impersonal mistreatment of individuals not by any identifiable evil person or politician, but by the configuration of the social structure. Racism, bigotry, and other oppressive paradigms cannot exist or flourish without the collective understanding that "this is the way things are." Subscribing to this philosophy, or at least not challenging it, cleanses us from any and all wrong doing to a certain group, even when one is an active member of that group (Sparks, 1994). Freire (1970) stated that any situation in which people are prevented from learning is an act of violence. The major thrust of his work is the exposition of the oppressor's role on the life and learning of the oppressed. The situation of oppression is, as he states, "a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those they oppress." In other words, to prevent others from learning is to violate their humanity. The dehumanizing of students is an insidious form of violence. This dehumanization can propel students to fail, drop out of school, or, in some cases, commit acts of aggression that culminate in their suspension or expulsion. In addition, the production of discriminatory educational results emanating from a school culture that distorts the social, historical, legal, and economic differences among students is an act of institutional violence (Marshall & Vaillancourt, 1993).

Continuing a critical analysis of high stakes testing as systemic violence, Epp and Watkinson (1997) discuss educational systemic violence as "any institutionalized practice or procedure that adversely impacts on disadvantaged individuals or groups by burdening them psychologically, mentally, culturally, spiritually, economically, or physically" (p. 4). Systemic violence is a byproduct of conventional policies and practices, such as high stakes testing, which support a climate of violence and policies and practices that appear neutral but result in discriminatory and adverse effects. Discrimination is systemic violence (Epp & Watkinson, 1997). Perhaps one of the major reasons for the growing reaction against high stakes testing is the detrimental and negative consequences. Subsequently, in a effort to increase scores and find more time to teach the content covered by high stakes tests, schools and districts are resorting to non-research-based strategies, such as increasing homework geared toward the test, abolishing recess for younger students to increase instructional time, limiting or eliminating time spent teaching subjects that are not assessed, and even holding students back in an effort to end social promotion (NEA Teaching and Learning Team, 2000). Also, as evidence of a blatant disrespect for human rights and a clear act of educational systemic violence, countless numbers of children – primarily poor, black, and brown – are being denied access to quality learning opportunities

on the basis of high stakes test scores. Being tracked, retained in a grade, or denied a diploma, regardless of what one knows or can do in real-life situations, are a few examples of the ways high stakes tests manifest institutional violence (Kohn, 2000).

When discussing the effects of educational systemic violence through high stakes test, there are two important factors that will produce future, if not current, political anxiety: (1) segregation; and (2) the departure of educators from the profession. The effects of high stakes testing programs on student retention, graduation, and admission into academic programs affects students' rights to a high quality public education. As mentioned throughout this article, high stakes testing is about test scores and accountability. These elements have consequences for schools as well as for the students themselves, such as withdrawal of monetary support if they are underperforming. It has been demonstrated that schools with large minority populations often fall below state and national averages on test scores. Thus, these schools would be affected disproportionately if future testing results in similar performance gaps (Brennan & Haas, 2001). Further, the publication and dissemination of test scores will have far-reaching implications because families with school-aged children often search out neighborhoods with schools that report higher test scores. Therefore, according to Kozol (1991), segregation of neighborhoods along racial and economic lines, which already exists, is likely to become worse.

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence, although little hard data, that many educators are leaving the K-12 educational arena because of what is being done to schools in the name of accountability and tougher standards (Kohn 2000). Evidence is supplied by several state surveys that have been able to capture the extent of educators' disapproval of testing. Given this environment, prospective teachers may rethink whether they want to begin a career in which high stake test scores have direct personal, professional, and economic consequences. School administrators are affected as well. A lead story in a respected New York newspaper reported that, "...a growing number of schools are rudderless, struggling to replace a graying corps of principals at a time when the pressure to raise test scores and other new demands have made an already difficult job an increasingly thankless one" (Kohn, 2000, 2). Unfortunately, those people who are quitting, or seriously thinking about doing so, are not the mediocre performers who are afraid of being held accountable. Rather, they are competent educators frustrated by the difficulty of doing high-quality teaching in the current climate (Noguera, 2002; Kohn, 2000).

The most serious limitations of high stakes testing is its determination that a student's level of educational cognizance can be evaluated by a narrowly focused test. The ongoing practice of high stakes testing in America's schools is an effort to address teaching and learning in a simplistic manner although students' educational progress is part of a complex equation, which is further compounded by the inequitable allocation of funding. In order to standardize a comprehensive education, we need input from a multiplicity of viewpoints regarding the cost and benefits of various educational programs for an increasingly diverse group of school children. High stakes testing oversimplifies complex educational and social issues; thus, unsound and hasty decisions are made. Currently, high stakes testing policies and practices ignore progressive processes that might justify their continued use.

## Conclusion

High stakes testing policies do not now and may never accomplish what they set out to do. Furthermore, if failure in attaining the goals for which the policy was created results in disproportionately negative effects on the life chances of America's poor, African American, and Latino students, then these policies are more than a benign error in political judgment. Rather, they reflect systemic violence that allows structural and institutional mechanisms, such as high stakes testing, to discriminate against all of America's poor and many of America's racial and ethnic students. Use of the theoretical framework presented in this article can provide valuable insights into the debates surrounding high stakes testing, thus offering yet another perspective about the unintended consequences of such policies and practices.

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# Taking Control of What Counts in Accountability: The Context-Enriched Report Card

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During the last two decades concerns about the quality of education have resulted in widespread calls for educational improvement and reform in many nations (McGinn, 1999). In the United States, this call has been accompanied by state accountability measures focused largely on student achievement as measured by a standardized test. Forty-nine states in the United States assess students as part of their accountability system. Most of them use results of standardized achievement and/or state-sponsored tests as the primary tool for judging school success (Franklin & Crane, 1993).

Thirty-six of these states share test results with the public through the use of a report card, which is distributed to parents of school children and reported in local and state newspapers. Many state report cards provide useful information, but in terms that are difficult to understand for most parents and community members. This information is typically brief and statistical in nature. A letter grade is often assigned to schools based on these statistical results. Thus, the public receives "sound bytes" about their schools – snippets of information that are often reported without a means to interpret them in a contextually relevant way. The reductionist nature of most state mandated reports limits the information available to parents and community members from which judgments can be made about the quality of the education offered. An over-emphasis on standardized tests has raised issues and concerns. These issues include the narrowness in defining success; ignoring the diverse needs of children and creating additional barriers to success and opportunities, particularly among those from poor, low-income environments; and deprofessionalizing educators (Levinson, 2000; Kohn, 2000; Whitford & Jones, 2000).

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This goal of increased communication has become increasingly important with the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). This act claims that one of its purposes is to offer parents more information about the quality of schooling that their children receive and to offer more choices to parents in schools that do not perform adequately on high stakes standardized tests. As part of this effort, schools are now required to report disaggregated data for type of education (general or special education), race/ethnicity, primary language, socioeconomic status (free or reduced lunch), and gender. Disaggregated data can offer new insights about how a district or school is doing, but there are also areas of caution. For example, we know that low-income children typically score lower on standardized tests. In many areas of the country, a disproportionate number of Black students are poor. Consequently, a disproportionate number of Black students do not score well on these tests. It is important that such statistics are provided to the general public with an explanation of what they do and do not mean so that misinterpretation does not occur.

The purpose of this article is to describe a supplemental reporting mechanism that augments current reports based on high stakes tests. Our goal has been to create a way to provide additional information to the public so that the criteria used to judge a school's educational quality is broadened. The article outlines the processes used in developing a school-based report card as well as the fundamental beliefs and purposes that underlie it. This type of reporting mechanism gives parents and community members a wider array of information with which to make judgments about the educational success of schools.

## **Problems and Criticisms of High Stakes Accountability Measures**

### **Limited Interpretations of Success**

The use of a single outcome measure (standardized or state sponsored tests) to assess school quality is a simplistic approach to assessing a complex environment. This approach is "grounded in the notion that only outcomes matter," and ignores the "daily life and culture of the school and district context" (Wheelock, 2000, 180). Using such a narrow means to measure success and rank schools limits the types of data available for decision-making and while making this type of assessment a major determinant in what is taught and valued in our society (Gipps, 1999). It is a summative evaluation approach that overlooks the potential of innovative programs in progress which may positively affect student outcomes over time (Guskey, 1996).

### **Ignoring Contextual Realities**

Most state accountability systems focus on comparing schools rather than on the gains a school or group of schools has made toward meeting educational goals or standards. Thus, state accountability procedures create a system in which schools can be perceived in terms of winners and losers (Frank & Cook, 1995). Often schools with high percentages of poor and minority students are seen as "deficient" since it is these schools that usually end up with low scores and consequently with report cards that label them as failures (Whitford & Jones, 2000).

Although there is evidence that these tests can be biased, making the stakes even higher for students from low-income, under-resourced areas, test results are often viewed by the public as reasonable assessments of success and a valued method for determining outcomes (Cochran-Smith, 2000). At the same time, the student population in the United States is becoming increasingly culturally diverse,

requiring varied instructional and assessment approaches. In addition, the use of standardized tests as the single measure of school and student success undermines the concept of local control and consideration of context.

Thus, many school systems are in a quandary as to whether they should address the needs of their students in multiple ways or concentrate efforts on external mandates. For example, when examining the impact of the Kentucky reform system (KERA) which ultimately placed a major emphasis on the use of quantitative data and a "single number... to measure the school's total educational performance, schools with high numbers of low income students that had already instituted reform practices aimed at supporting the social, emotional, and academic aspects of learning were more likely to fall 'in decline' or 'in crisis.' and revert to old methods of instruction and operations" (Hohmann, 2000, 221).

Other unintended outcomes that have occurred as a result of the high stakes testing environment, particularly in high poverty schools, include retention of low-achieving students, encouraging students to drop-out of school, and placing students in special education classes to avoid having them tested (Darling-Hammond, 1991). Thus, the espoused purpose of accountability measures – improving schools – may, in fact, be leading to negative consequences for those students most at-risk (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Kohn, 2000).

### ***Disenfranchising and Deprofessionalizing Educators***

A third criticism of the "outcomes only" approach to accountability is that it negates the role of professionals in teaching and learning and places them in the role of technician. Today it is common for principals and teachers in low performing schools to be villainized by politicians and the media. In a recent study conducted on issues of empowerment for principals participating in the South Florida Annenberg Challenge, a school reform initiative that emphasizes local innovation, many principals indicated that there was too much emphasis on high stakes testing. This, in turn, encouraged teaching to the test, increased stress for principals and teachers, decreased morale, and curriculum and forced instructional changes geared toward improving test scores rather than improving teaching and learning (Reed & Gorrell, 2000; Reed et al., 2001). Hohmann (2002) found that top-down reforms, such as mandated testing, often "seriously compromise" the leadership of the principal trying to create meaningful reform and shift the "locus of control" from teachers and principals to a "higher governmental agency," thus limiting the essential role of these professionals in fostering student and school success (p. 221). When dealing with the impact of the situation on teachers, Hillard (2000) writes, "Many teachers whom I see have become depressed and terrorized by the mindless demands for inappropriate standardization not only in testing but in teaching as well" (p. 302).

Likewise the system of rewards and punishments imposed upon educational professionals and schools, which is intended to motivate them to excel, may have the opposite effect. As Kohn (2000) notes, "[S]ubstantial research literature has demonstrated that the more rewards or punishments are used as a way of inducing people to engage in an activity [or to improve their performance], the more these individuals tend to lose interest in whatever had to be done to receive the reward or escape the punishment" (p. 319). The No Child Left Behind Act carries with it the threat of closing schools and encouraging parents to move their children to other schools if their school is classified as underperforming. While no child should be subjected to a poor education, the reality is that many children and their families

do not have the social capital needed to negotiate district bureaucracy and switch schools. Consequently, those who need increased opportunities the most are those least likely to access them. By cutting back the resources available to poor performing schools, the poor and disenfranchised are once again the ones who lose out, even though the federal legislation claims to be concerned about their needs.

### ***Accountability Within Our Context***

The situation in Alabama is not very different from that in many other states. In 1995, the Alabama legislature passed the Education Accountability Plan, which mandated that accountability reports be made to the public 90 days after the beginning of the fiscal year. Under this plan, all public school students in grades three through eleven were administered the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT), a norm-referenced, multiple-choice test. As of spring 2002, only students in grades three through nine must take the SAT. Grades ten through twelve are assessed by an exit exam. The exit exam is a new test, implemented in 1999, that has been designed to raise the standards of education in the state.

Since 1996, the state superintendent of education has issued report cards for public schools, based on the results of standardized tests. Test results are summarized in a school report card that is sent home to parents and distributed to the media. The report card includes numerical ratings and letter grades from "A" through "F". They also provide information that can be used to compare a school with other schools in the state. Simplified portions of these report cards are printed in local newspapers and are publicized widely through other media.

Recent research on the factors related to high and low performance on these tests in Alabama indicates that low achieving schools had a higher percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch and fewer teachers with advanced degrees than high achieving schools. Additionally, schools with greater percentages of high socioeconomic status students receive more local revenue than schools with high percentages of low socioeconomic status students (Nelson, 2000). This is consistent with results in other states, which indicate that failing schools educate a disproportionate number of disadvantaged students (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Young & Smith, 1997). Thus, in Alabama, as in other states, schools that have high percentages of students classified as low income are being publicly labeled as failures with the blame for their failure being placed on teachers, administrators, and often the students themselves.

### ***Creating Partnerships for Change***

In 1998, Auburn University formed a Professional Development School Partnership with Loachapoka Elementary School to address educational needs and improvement. This is a rural school of approximately 350 students in grades K-5 of which 90% are African American and receive free or reduced price lunches. In 1997, the school was placed on "academic caution" by the state, based on standardized achievement test scores. Thus, the partnership team's initial focus was on working with teachers to better prepare students to score well on the standardized achievement tests and to develop motivational programs to encourage and reward successful student achievement on the tests. The school's standardized achievement test scores improved from the 36th percentile in the 1997-98 school year to the 50th percentile in the 1998-99. Although we were pleased with these results, we wanted to address issues of improved teaching and learning in a broader context, not one focused solely on standardized test results. This

led to discussions about the state accountability system, its negative impact on the school and community, and our responsibility to take control over keeping the community informed in a meaningful way about the quality of education in their school.

**Rationale for Our Work**

While we believe that the accountability system in our state must be re-examined and revised, we also believe that while it is in place, steps must be taken to minimize the negative impact it is having on schools. As our partnership and the relationships within it have grown, we have become keenly aware of the effect of the public labeling of this school as being "unsatisfactory."

As faculty members who place their undergraduate students in this school as a part of university class activities, we consistently have to deal with misplaced apprehension and inaccurate perceptions of this school as being a "bad" place. Yet, once college students enter the elementary school, work with the children, and become engaged with the community, their beliefs and understandings have changed. As one student noted in her journal, "I was somewhat apprehensive when you sent me to Loachapoka, but after working there for this quarter, I love those children. I can honestly say I think they are the most well-behaved, most wonderful children in the school system."

Having worked in many of these schools, we have found some of the most competent and dedicated professionals we have ever met. Thus, for us and for those in this school, changing perceptions of those within and outside the school became a deep concern. We also

feel that as researchers and practitioners we have a responsibility to help educate others about more realistic means of assessing a school's educational opportunities and successes.

As our partnership members engaged in conversations about how to improve the educational environment for the students and teachers in this school, we decided it was imperative that we take immediate steps to rebuild internal confidence and external credibility in the value and performance of the school. Thus, we began our journey toward the creation of a school-based accountability and reporting system which resulted in the development of a "context-enriched report card."

**Developing the Context-Enriched Report Card**

**Foundational Beliefs**

Olson (1999) states that "both parents and taxpayers believe they can improve education with the right information, but they do not now think they are getting it" (p. 28). Olson observed that parents and other stakeholders want more than statistical information about schools. They also want "information about the quality of life in the school, school leadership, different program offerings, parent and student satisfaction rates, and the levels of parent involvement" (p. 33). Henry (1996) advocates a "community accountability system" that "relies on an open flow of information between public schools and the public" (p. 87). We agree and believe that what is of value in schools and education should be determined by the professionals and local stakeholders within the context in which it occurs. This

**Table 1**  
**Sample Framework for Value-Added, Context-Enriched Report Card**

<b>Assessment Categories</b>	<b>Specific Indicators</b>	<b>Sources for Data</b>	<b>Who is Responsible?</b>
<b>Student Performance</b>	<u>Product</u> - Performance based outcomes - Value-added indices <u>Process</u> - Test taking programs <u>Progress</u> - New academic programs	- Promotion rates - Grades - Comparisons of standardized test scores across time - Preparations for test taking - Tutoring - New academic programs	Vice Principal Teachers Principal Resource Teacher Teachers Teachers
<b>Teaching for Understanding*</b>	<u>Product</u> - Authentic assessments - Test emphasis on complex thinking <u>Process</u> - Inquiry-based learning in classes <u>Progress</u> - Use of cooperative learning - Problem based learning	- Professional development activities - Administrative observations - Student surveys	University Professor Principal Vice Principal
<b>Classrooms and Schools as Learning Communities*</b>	<u>Product</u> - Student and teacher involvement in developing curriculum/learning <u>Process</u> - Action research <u>Progress</u> - Team teaching activities	- Coordinated planning time for science units - Insights from teacher work teams - Student comments	Teachers

\*Based on *Guiding Principles of the Holmes Group* (Holmes Group, 1990).

assertion is based on the assumption that educators represent a source of professional judgment that others cannot offer and that, because of their personal and contextual knowledge, local stakeholders can also make judgments about the worth or quality of educational programs or schools (Reed & Ross, 2002).

Although we have to live with the existing state accountability and reporting system, we could also begin to take some control of information shared with the public by also distributing our own locally developed report card. We began by working to define what counts as quality and by collecting, analyzing, and reporting on a wide range of information. Our efforts turned to facilitating discussions about purposes, format, distribution, content, development, and assessment procedures we would use in creating and distributing this accountability mechanism. (See Table 1 for a sample framework.)

### **Purposes**

We began by establishing four purposes for our report card. First we wanted it to be something that would encourage our team members and other educators to take a proactive stance in framing and responding to the concept and process of accountability. Second, we wanted to develop a tool that would help all of us focus on the improvement of teaching and learning. Our third goal was to inform the public about the quality of the education at this school in a comprehensive, yet understandable way. Our fourth purpose was to provide stakeholders with the opportunity to provide feedback about what is important to them and to share their perceptions about the quality of education that was being provided to children in the community.

### **Format and Distribution**

We wanted to ensure that enough information would be reported to allow our stakeholders to make informed decisions about the quality of education provided. At the same time we wanted the information to be concise and easily understood.

We also wanted to report our information in a format that would be non-threatening, particularly to parents, for whom "report card" and "statistics" might be intimidating. Thus, we decided to share school data in a format similar to a newsletter. To distinguish it from a newsletter, we chose the title *Evaluator*, emphasizing its function as a means of judging the school's effectiveness. The content focuses on quality indicators which are emphasized in all issues. The partnership team decided that the *Evaluator* would be sent to parents with the first student report card of the year and again with the results of the end-of-year standardized tests. Parents could then judge the worth of the school based on both state standards and those the school and community deemed important.

### **Content**

One of the first steps we took after deciding to develop the context-enriched report card was to create a framework to systematically collect, discuss, synthesize, and report meaningful data. We wanted the accountability system to be comprehensive and to report on a wide range of quality indicators. Thus, we decided to report, not only on products, but also the processes, and progress of education within the school (Guskey, 1996). We believe that we have a responsibility to provide our readers with a wide array of information from which they can draw their own conclusions about the effectiveness and value of the school and the extent to which children are receiving a quality education.

Product indicators. Scriven (1979) suggests that we enter the evaluation process open to assessing any and all effects of a program. Therefore, we decided to include a variety of instructional elements and curricular outcomes in the *Evaluator*. Since the state accountability system judgements are based on standardized test scores, the implications for ignoring perceptions about these tests can spell trouble for the administrators, teachers, and students at a school. Consequently, in issues of the *Evaluator*, we are careful to discuss standardized testing with an eye toward educating the public about what such test scores do and do not mean. To provide a balance, numerous other outcomes of student learning are highlighted. For example, in one issue featured a piece about student skill mastery through participation in an integrated physical education/academic content program.

Process indicators. The *Evaluator* also reports on process indicators. In an article on conveying school performance, Reed et al. (2000) state that to the public, accountability "means that a complete portrait should be painted." To paint a complete portrait, the public needs more than numbers that compare schools. Rather, they need to know what schools are doing to educate students, or, in Guskey's (1996) terms, the "hows" of education. Smylie and Tuermer (1995) suggest that "organizational antecedents to meaningful, long-term programmatic change and increased student learning" should be an early focus of evaluation. Such information affords readers the opportunity to evaluate the "means" as well as the "ends" of education.

Indicators of progress. Gains made toward learning goals are termed progress variables (Guskey 1996). Efforts toward improving education and indications that students are learning or making progress, regardless of what standardized assessment scores, should play a large role in defining school success and effectiveness.

Categories reflecting product, process, and product indicators. We based our selection of categories to reflect the product, process, and product indicators on two types of standards. First, since the partnership is a direct outgrowth of the Holmes Group, it seemed appropriate to adopt Holmes Group principles (Holmes Group 1990, vii) as follows:

- (a) teaching for understanding;
- (b) organizing classrooms and schools as learning communities;
- (c) setting ambitious goals for everybody's children;
- (d) establishing an environment that supports continuous learning for all adults as well as for children;
- (e) making reflection and inquiry the central feature of the school;
- (f) inventing a new organization.

Second, we considered elements of effective schools, including leadership, high expectations, effective teaching practices, and school climate (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1993).

Finally, considering both the Holmes Group principles and the literature on effective schools, we developed eleven assessment categories for which we would consistently collect data in terms of product, process, and progress. The assessment categories include: (1) student performance; (2) teaching for understanding; (3) making reflection and inquiry a central feature of the school; (4) thinking of classrooms and schools as learning communities; (5) setting ambitious goals for all children; (6) considering health and safety; (7) stimulating continuous learning for adults as well as children; (8) creating a positive school climate; (9) developing community partnerships; (10) inventing a new

organization; and (11) help wanted. Our last category was included to offer avenues for parents and others to become actively involved in shaping the school. These categories are reflective of the goals at this school and of the Professional Development School relationship. As such, they are contextually meaningful indicators of success and learning opportunities.

Collecting data for the report card. After deciding on these categories, we created a design framework to use for organizing and using our data. We discussed and listed specific items or activities in each category related to products, processes and progress. Next, we identified potential sources of data to be collected or analyzed. Third, we identified who would be responsible for collecting the data. Last, we established a timeline for completion. Once data are collected and organized, we reflect on the data and what it means in relationship to our progress toward meeting identified goals.

## Reflections on Our Work

### Impact on the School

Although the state report card summarizing the standardized test results does provide valuable information to the school and, to an extent, the community, we argue that these statistical reports do not provide nearly enough information or explanation to the community. For impoverished schools making a serious effort to improve student learning, a "context-enriched" report card can help parents and others understand that schools are more than test results. They are places that help young people grow and develop. Parents' and community members' comments support the contention that the school's image can be affected by a context-enriched report card. The following comments are representative of the responses we received: "I like [the] *Evaluator* because it tell[s] of all the thing[s] that are going on to improve our school for the better education of our children" and "I can see a change in the whole school, K-6 – a very good change – and I'm proud of it."

### Impact on Our Partnership

The accountability system we have created and the reporting mechanism we have employed have been an important part of our work in creating a powerful PDS partnership. We have spent time examining the extent to which our work together has been collaborative and enriching for partners. We have been careful to assure that all members of each partnership group have had some responsibilities for developing and enacting the evaluative process and that we have held one another accountable for the tasks to be performed. The process of determining what to report, how to report it, and what to consider as evidence has fostered a co-mentoring atmosphere in the school (Stover & Reed, 2002) that holds teachers accountable to each other while offering job-embedded professional development opportunities.

The experience of working together on this effort has impacted us and others in a variety of ways. The organizational format of the context-enriched report card facilitates open and honest assessment of school-wide strengths and areas for growth. The deliberative manner for selecting articles for publication in the *Evaluator* fosters inquiry about what is occurring and why, as well as reflection about the consequences of those actions. By systematically addressing each of the categories and the products, process, and progress indicators we have engaged in a continuous process of school improvement and have been able to identify key areas of concern and growth.

## Continuous Improvement

Although we have received positive responses to the *Evaluator*, we have also continued to improve it. The last few issues of the *Evaluator* were reformatted such that the categories of success indicators were more explicitly stated. Each category addressed was used as a heading for a section. We have added a feedback section asking parents and community members to help evaluate the quality of the school and its programs as this appears to be an avenue to increase parental involvement in the evaluation of the school and school improvement. We are also eager to reach a wider audience. Toward this end, we plan to distribute the next edition of the *Evaluator* to more local businesses and organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce.

## Summary

We have developed a school quality reporting system that promotes proactive accountability, fosters on-going inquiry and reflection, and informs the public in a comprehensive and understandable way. The *Evaluator* provides a way for the teachers and other school personnel to decide what should be reported to the parents and community about the school. Through the process of gathering and reporting data, reflection on the functioning of the school and the quality of its programs is facilitated. The report card does not rely solely on statistics but gives concise descriptions of the process and progress made by teachers and students as well as the results of their efforts (products). Educators use their professional judgment to determine areas of strength, processes in place, and progress being made, as well as areas needing greater attention.

A primary goal of all school improvement should be the enhancement of teaching and learning conditions (Hillard, 2000). As a part of the process of improvement, a broad concept of student learning, not just improved achievement test scores, needs to be measured and reported to the public so that informed decisions can be made about the quality of education. Further, ongoing inquiry and reflection about the best content and means for educating our nation's young people should occur on a regular basis. We believe that our locally-based accountability system offers one means of accomplishing these goals. It is important for all educators to become proactive in accountability and reporting processes. Such action is particularly important for those schools considered to have children "at risk" since these schools appear to have the most to lose in today's present "rewards and punishments" environment.

Three schools in this school district now use the context-enriched reporting process. Through evaluative tools such as the context-enriched report card we can work toward helping the public to be well-informed participants, not just consumers of our educational systems. In this way, we can begin to reframe the educational and political agenda that is overwhelming many schools, educators, and children. Rather than reacting to state reported information, members of the professional school community reviewed their school in an honest and systematic manner and then reported their findings to the greater school community. This process helped to redirect some of the power away from the state and return it to educators and the communities in which they live and work. The context-enriched report card appears to be one strategy for engaging in meaningful accountability in an age of educational reform.

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# Standing at the Crossroads: Taking the Path of Least Resistance or Forging Ahead Toward Action-Oriented Assessment?

Jaci Webb-Dempsey

Over the past decade, many universities and colleges who prepare teachers have begun the hard work of establishing partnerships with K-12 schools in order to simultaneously renew the preparation and practice of teachers. Since 1988, West Virginia University has partnered with a network of public schools to redesign its teacher education program and establish Professional Development Schools as vehicles for simultaneous renewal. The partnership, known as the Benedum Collaborative, has grown from its original membership of the Colleges of Human Resources and Education and Arts and Sciences and five public schools to include the university, five school districts, and 29 Professional Development Schools. This initiative has required participants to make a commitment to the belief that practice should be the foundation of teacher preparation and that practitioners should be integrally involved in both the preparation of the next generation of teachers and the continuous renewal of teaching and learning in their schools and in the larger educational community.

The historical origins of this premise are well-documented in the work of John Dewey and the establishment of lab schools similar to the Dewey School and Colonel Parker's "practice school" in the late 1890s. More recently, this belief has been emphasized in the work of organizations such as the Holmes Partnership and Goodlad's National Network for Education Renewal. The lab schools of the 1800s also had another charge – the systematic generation of a knowledge base about teaching and learning in the context of classrooms. As Dewey (1900) shared, much of the work done in lab schools was to "exhibit, test, verify and criticize theoretical statements and principles" and "to add to the sum of facts and principles in its special line." While some might take issue with the notion of schools as labs for testing theory, arguing instead that they are contexts for developing our theories of teaching and learning, I would certainly agree that this focus on inquiry should be an essential feature of the continuous and generative renewal of school/university partnerships. Further, it is the willingness to take risks and the growing capacity for practice-based inquiry that uniquely positions partnerships as places where we can begin to move toward practice-based, action-oriented assessment.

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Looking nationally, the institutionalization of this latest manifestation of practice-based preparation is apparent in the development and implementation of National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education standards for Professional Development Schools and mandatory requirements or legislative support for school/university partnerships in some states. The growing number of school/university partnerships and Professional Development Schools in this country reflects a growing consensus, at least among educators, that the contexts of teaching and learning really are where we come to better understand best practice. This shift from the traditional, heavily theoretical model of teacher preparation programs, housed and delivered by institutions of higher education, to practice as the context for preparation has also begun to translate into alternative models for generating knowledge about teaching and learning and assessing the quality of teaching practice.

The partnership at West Virginia University, similar to school/university partnerships elsewhere, not only acknowledges the expertise grounded in practice – it invites practitioners to the table when program policy is being crafted, when program evaluation is being designed, and when assessment systems for documenting the performance of preservice teachers are being developed. Both extending and honoring that invitation has been a test of the previously mentioned partnership and the new roles and relationships it represents. Struggles over who should have the last say in matters of program development and assessment have occurred because opportunities were created for issues of ownership to be confronted. Stakeholders came to the table and worked out their differences and, in the process, learned how to engage in productive collaboration. It would have been far easier and much less time-consuming to continue making decisions behind the walls of separate institutions rather than view decision points as opportunities to build a collaborative culture. However, in the long run it is that shared culture that strengthens our work.

An area where we continue to confront issues of ownership in the Collaborative has to do with who generates legitimate knowledge about teaching and learning, how they generate it, and what we do with it once we have it. The ownership of research on teaching and learning has emerged as one of the last bastions of the traditional academic orientation, bolstered by the norms of academe that continue to value and reward "ivory tower" models of scholarship. Just as the shift to sites of practice as sites of teacher preparation and professional development has been hotly contested, the concurrent and complimentary shift toward acknowledgement of teacher research as both a legitimate source of professional knowledge and a rich form of professional development is not without its challenges. Strategic public discourse and exemplary sites of innovation have driven and legitimated the shift in teacher preparation and professional development, and those factors have also begun driving a shift in our understandings of legitimate inquiry. Researchers in the field of teacher education have for some time been making the argument that teacher research, or action research, "has particular potential for transforming the university-generated knowledge base" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Discourse related to this shift has fostered risk-taking and partnering among teachers in particular schools, between teachers and university faculty, and between teachers, university faculty and teacher education students. These networks of teacher researchers have begun to share their work more publicly, extending that discourse and contesting the traditional lines of ownership. In addition to the issue of ownership of

the creation and application of a knowledge base lies the high stakes issues surrounding the assessment of teaching.

### Assessing Teachers

The acknowledgement of the legitimacy of practice-based preparation, professional development, and research has begun to have a ripple effect in the area of teacher assessment. While some state systems and national teacher quality assurance organizations such as the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards have established a foundation for more performance-based assessments of teacher quality by either requiring or strongly encouraging portfolio documentation of teaching performance, the majority of state systems continue to rely on standardized tests, either of teachers or their students, as the primary measure of teacher quality.

At the state level, entrance to the profession typically requires novice teachers to meet state standards for Praxis exams or National Teacher exams and practitioner performance is most often examined by proxy via inadequate and often misapplied analyses of student achievement test data. At the federal level, school success continues to be measured by tests of student achievement, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Policymakers and the general public continue to be more invested in these test scores due to beliefs that they are less subjective and more easily understood than emerging forms of alternative assessment. Those of us who have undertaken the task of developing performance-based assessment systems in our teacher preparation programs would acknowledge the tremendous investment of time and energy this task requires. We would also acknowledge the time and energy required to build common understandings of more complex indicators of performance such that these systems can be implemented effectively. It is far less demanding to require preservice and experienced teachers to simply take a test that will supposedly assign a numeric value to what a teacher knows about what to do in a classroom than it is to attempt to document what it is that they actually do and the impact of those practices on student learning. It is also much more efficient and, in the short-term, cheaper to render judgment based on a test administered over the course of several hours versus rigorous observation, collection of artifacts, and reflection over the course of many months. While experience and common sense tell us which measure is most meaningful, standards of utility, efficiency and cost often lead our constituents to demand the lesser measure.

Based on what we have learned in our work with the Benedum Collaborative establishing Professional Development Schools, developing a performance-based assessment system, and encouraging and supporting teacher action research, we argue for a very different way of assessing teacher quality. We stake the claim that teacher assessment practices should not just assess the performance of preservice teachers or count the numbers of teachers who apply for National Board certification, but rather it should emphasize the value of engaging in rich, meaningful, ongoing assessment of teacher practice at all stages of teacher development. Further, we argue that those of us serving as teacher educators at colleges and universities must be held to the same standards with similar forms of assessment. Given the need for assessment and the need for ongoing professional development targeted to address areas of weakness, engaging in assessment that looks like teacher research will not only address issues of efficiency and cost, but also serve multiple needs. What follows is a description

of the path the Benedum Collaborative has taken toward new forms of assessment.

### Action Research in the Benedum Collaborative

One of the first steps taken when the Benedum Collaborative began its work over a decade ago was the generation of two sets of principles that guide the development of Professional Development Schools and the preparation of novice teachers. The five Professional Development Schools Belief Statements (Holmes Group, 1990) describe the kinds of places we believe schools should be in order to best support the continuous professional development of teachers and the learning experiences of K-12 students and preservice teachers. The five-year Benedum Collaborative Teacher Education Program is guided by a set of ten characteristics that complement the Professional Development Schools Belief Statements, describing the kinds of teachers we expect our teacher education students to become. Cross-referenced with the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium principles and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards propositions, our characteristics are similar to standards developed by numerous other teacher preparation programs and organizations around the country. The novice teacher described by this set of characteristics is:

- (1) committed to lifelong learning;
- (2) an effective communicator;
- (3) cognizant of the professional, moral and ethical dimensions of teaching and learning;
- (4) a facilitator of learning for all students;
- (5) able to draw upon an in-depth knowledge of pedagogy;
- (6) able to draw upon an in-depth knowledge of content;
- (7) able to effectively integrate content and pedagogy;
- (8) a reflective practitioner;
- (9) aware of and respectful of human diversity;
- (10) liberally educated.

In the Professional Development Schools and in the teacher education program, there is an intentional focus on reflective practice as a vehicle for continuous school and professional renewal.

A major factor that fosters reflective practice is a required course in the five-year program, *Teacher as Researcher*, which guides students in the development of the skills and habits of mind that enable and encourage ongoing, systematic reflection. Students begin their work for this course four semesters before they officially enroll in it, attending an introductory action research seminar during the third year of the program, participating in seminars designed to educate them in research methods, crafting their action research proposals during the fourth year, and completing their action research projects as a demonstration of the culminating research competency as Masters candidates during the fifth year. Students develop their understandings of action research and their studies in the context of extensive clinical experience, spending two hours each week in their host PDS as third year tutors; one to two days each week as fourth year participants; and a full semester as interns. They enroll in *Teacher as Researcher* for graduate credit during the final semester of the fifth year when they are engaged in disseminating the results of their research in papers, Web postings, exhibit posters, and presentations at their Professional Development Schools and at an annual conference sponsored by the Benedum Collaborative. Throughout the five semesters of the action research experience, students are supported by both K-12 and university faculty



and are mentored by preservice teachers further along in the process. At any given time, faculty are mentoring students at all phases of the action research process, from selecting their study focus to disseminating their results. Supporting this mentorship requires a great deal of communication and capacity-building. To this end, a number of faculty from programs across the College of Human Resources and Education, including faculty from Educational Leadership, Educational Psychology, Technology Education, Special Education, Speech Pathology and Audiology, Curriculum and Instruction, Reading, and Social and Cultural Foundations, meet regularly to orchestrate not only the activities for students, but also professional development for faculty in action research.

While the research projects students complete have been called "action research" projects since the inception of the program, understandings of just what action research is and should be among university and Professional Development School faculty has varied. It has not been without struggle or strife that action research in our program has evolved from a quasi-traditional, discipline-based thesis to a multidisciplinary action research study. It has taken nearly five years and innumerable, sometimes contentious, discussions to reach a somewhat common understanding of what we mean by action research in the program. Kincheloe (1991) explains why this journey has been rocky: "The cult of the expert will undoubtedly be uncomfortable with such research populism." Some university faculty have chosen not to continue their participation in the action research process as that understanding has moved further and further from quasi-experimental designs and replication of well-understood and well-documented theories of teaching and learning, and further from their own imprimatur as researchers. Faculty in the Professional Development Schools, particularly in elementary settings, have been more accepting and supportive of movement away from purely discipline-based forms of inquiry, perhaps reflecting their explicit efforts in their teaching to integrate research across the curriculum. Regardless, even in the Professional Development Schools, there have been faculty members who have been uncomfortable yielding control and moving away from theory-testing to action-oriented inquiry. Along the way students, have often received mixed messages about what is and is not action research in the Benedum Collaborative, and these conflicts have been reflected in the topics and methods of their action research projects. For example, some students have chosen to study topics such as the effects of various classroom seating arrangements on student engagement or the effects of classical music on test scores rather than focusing on issues far more critical to their teaching performance, such as the conditions that promote meaningful learning, because they believed such studies would be easier to design in ways that could document cause and effect. Not surprisingly, these studies reflected the interests and methodologies of their university mentors rather than methods that would enable preservice teachers to learn to document the complexities of classroom environments and create rich descriptions of how they support learning.

The definition of action research the Collaborative has recently "officially" adopted is focused on developing the skills and reflective habits necessary to engage in action research as preservice teachers with the intention of motivating them to adopt a reflective stance in their professional practice. The action research conducted by preservice teachers in the five-year teacher education program is intended to be deliberate, improvement-oriented investigation of teaching practice, characterized by an ongoing process of problem identification,

systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action, and, finally, problem redefinition. As teacher action research is often a collaborative activity where practitioners work together to help one another design and carry out investigations in their classrooms and schools, preservice teachers may choose to conduct their research collaboratively. Regardless, each action research project is derived collaboratively, involving preservice teachers, host teachers, teacher education coordinators, and university liaisons in the identification of an area of inquiry and the design of an investigation. The terms "action" and "research" are used in conjunction to represent the essential features of this cyclical process; that is, trying out ideas in practice as a means of increasing knowledge about and/or improving curriculum, teaching, and learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). Action research in the five-year program is not about testing theory, improving the work environment of teachers, developing school policy, or revising a school-wide curriculum; instead it is focused on teaching practice at the classroom level. Practitioners may conduct action research to enhance their professional lives and school level policies and practices; however, action research conducted by our preservice teachers is conducted to enhance their understandings about both their own teaching and their students' learning. Teacher education students are encouraged to involve themselves in these other kinds of research activities at their Professional Development Schools when doing so serves a need at the school and their own professional goals as preservice teachers. While conducted in a systematic manner with integrity, this action research is not traditional "scientific research." It is not conducted by university professors or scholars and does not include experimental and control groups that would exclude groups of students from a beneficial teaching practice.

This definition is somewhat limited in that we are concerned with issues of control, e.g., not controlling variables and intervening factors, but control over the practice or program being investigated. Students are encouraged to focus on classroom practice and discouraged from looking at school policies and programs over which they have no purview and limited opportunity to make improvements or "take action." In the past few years students have been encouraged to collaborate with one another to look at their topics collectively in a variety of classroom contexts. This year a small number of our students will also collaborate with their host teachers to implement their studies.

### **Inquiry and Assessment in the Collaborative**

The process of forging a shared understanding of action research, including its purposes and processes, has forced us to also consider the broader application of this stance beyond teacher preparation. While the Collaborative has historically supported the efforts of university and K-12 faculty to document those practices being developed and applied in the context of the Professional Development Schools, the forms of documentation have typically reflected standards of scholarly research, rather than research on teaching and learning. Three major initiatives have involved Professional Development Schools and university faculty in collaborative research: (1) a comprehensive assessment of the impact of Professional Development Schools; (2) a Writer's Guild designed to support faculty writing projects; and (3) the requirement that all site improvement grants awarded in the Collaborative be evaluated by the teachers engaged in the initiative. In the assessment study, school and university faculty and graduate students work together as a team to design and implement research intended to

document and describe the impact of the Professional Development Schools initiative by interviewing, observing, and surveying teachers and students in the Professional Development Schools. The Writer's Guild provides support for school and university faculty to work together over summers to analyze data and write about their joint research projects. Sometimes joint projects are evaluations of the site-based innovations implemented with funding from the Collaborative. Interestingly, while written representations have most often been presented as traditional research reports, oral representations have brought the work much closer to articulation of presenters' tacit knowledge of teaching and learning. It is this intersection of tacit and explicit knowledge that has been the "point of no return" for some colleagues and the point of departure from tradition for others. This point of intersection may also be the critical juncture for teacher assessment.

### Blurring the Distinctions

In the early 1990s, Eisner described the need for a form of teacher evaluation that is an inherent part of teachers' everyday lives and is an iterative, reflective and participatory process (Eisner 1990). Weiss and Weiss (1998), in their synthesis of the research on teacher evaluation, proposed that such assessment is becoming more necessary. They describe the growing acknowledgement of the complexities of teaching practice and recognition that meaningful and useful forms of assessment must reflect those complexities. Weiss and Weiss (1998) further postulate that teachers are becoming more adept at "developing multidimensional, integrated learning environments where knowledge depends on the values of the persons working with it and the context within which that work [is conducted]." We suggest that assessment must, therefore, become more expert at capturing that which is idiographic. In a recent article, Hiebert, Gallimore and Stigler (2002) suggest that the field of educational research should, "explore the possibility of building a useful knowledge base for teaching by beginning with practitioners' knowledge." They go on to outline key features of teacher knowledge: (1) It is linked with practice; (2) It is detailed, concrete and specific; and (3) It is integrated. It is this latter feature that simultaneously makes teacher knowledge so useful and so difficult to document.

Assessment that will measure the kinds of performances we expect from the teachers we are attempting to grow in the Benedum Collaborative should reflect the values that nurture their development. Those values include committing to a career of learning, reflection, integration, and collaboration. We are consciously preparing the next generation of teachers to be not just critical consumers, but also producers and participants in knowledge about best practice. In his discussion of the action research orientation, Kincheloe (1991) explains:

Unlike empirical instruments, humans can synthesize information, generate interpretations, and revise and sophisticate those interpretations at the site the inquiry takes place. In the process the human as research instrument can explore the unusual, the idiosyncratic situations... teacher researchers can revolutionize professional practice by viewing themselves as potentially the most sophisticated research instruments available.

Action research not only provides a renewable knowledge base for teaching, but also provides the foundation and vehicle for assessment

of teaching practice. Action research is both professional development and knowledge production. If the ultimate goal of assessment is to improve practice, rather than categorize and then reward "good" teachers and punish "bad" teachers, what is a better process than one grounded in the idiographic context of a teacher's practice, one that identifies real problems, and one that is in and of itself a vehicle for improvement?

As we prepare the next generation of teachers to be researchers, we should consider the opportunity we have to shape the future of educational research, the assessment of teaching, and how to best take advantage of that opportunity. School/university partnerships and professional development school networks have proven to be the kinds of cultural places where we have been able to take the risks that the movement to legitimate teacher action research requires. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) argue that "research by teachers represents a distinctive way of knowing about teaching and learning that will alter – not just add to – what we know in the field." At the same time, they identify four obstacles that have historically constrained movement in this direction:

We argue that to encourage wider involvement of teachers in research, it is necessary to overcome the serious obstacles caused by teacher isolation, a school culture that works against raising questions, a technical view of knowledge for teaching, and the negative reputation of educational research.

The collaborative cultures that characterize professional development school partnerships and their mission of simultaneous renewal make them communities that can overcome these obstacles to support and nurture innovations. They are also the best places to begin systematically moving toward the development of new forms of action-oriented assessment. After all, collaborative processes contribute to collective understandings, and that is what accountability is all about.

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# Book Study Teams: Empowering Others to Become Leaders in the 21st Century

**Gerald D. Bailey**  
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Over the last five years, the department of Educational Administration and Leadership at Kansas State University has been engaging in a series of university-school district partnerships to improve the training of school leaders. Specifically, faculty at Kansas State University have reached out to school districts who have a special interest in preparing their faculty for leadership positions – both administrators and leaders of leaders within their faculty. One of the most recent partnerships involves Kansas State University with two school districts: Marysville U.S.D. 364 and Rock Creek U.S.D. 323 which are located near Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. The partnership focuses on delivering a comprehensive program resulting in a leadership degree and/or building level administrative certificate.

From the outset, this partnership has focused on preparing administrators and school leaders in a different fashion. Courses are: (1) co-planned by university and school district faculty, (2) co-taught by faculty and school superintendents, (3) delivered onsite to students in alternating locations, and (4) focused on teams who learn together for a sustained period of time.

While much of the program content focuses on the ISLC Standards, the course content comes from a wide range of books. While traditional administrative textbooks are used, there is a greater emphasis on other types of books including fields such as business, psychology, science, medicine, and futurism. Each semester, team members and faculty propose a series of books that relate to course outcomes. Students can select which book study team or teams by interest or need. Book study teams are formed which can range from four to eight students.

## Team Agreement

As a team, they must agree to do the following:

1. Select a team facilitator(s) for the selected book, or book series.
2. Dialogue and commit to the purpose of the book as it relates to course competencies or outcomes.

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3. Establish a schedule of times and places to meet which is agreeable to everyone.
4. Create an action plan that is a product or outcome of the book study process.
5. Participate in ongoing electronic dialogue about the issues raised in the book study (see Extending the Dialogue below).

## Extending the Dialogue

Technologies have provided opportunities for extending the potential of book study teams to higher levels of dialogue. These electronic systems for supporting teams allow continuous mission-focused dialogue that carries the book study teaming to new levels of communication. Extending the dialogue can be as simple as using email, or using something more elaborate such as Blackboard that Kansas State University provides for the leadership academy.

When electronic dialogue occurs between book study team meetings, it provides a mechanism for capturing and storing a record of communication. Equally important, it provides a repository of shared information for future action planning. Having well-structured information facilitates the distribution of information and knowledge among team members, and the information becomes available as needed. The challenge of book study team learning is in interpreting information and making it easily accessible to all team members.

## Book Study Guidelines

Prior to the book study activities, the following guidelines are discussed with the whole team.

1. The book study team leader does not need to have complete mastery of the book. However, they must have a basic understanding of the content.
2. The book study team leader needs to be a facilitator of the teaming and not a disseminator of knowledge. The book study facilitator needs to support teaming concepts such as empowerment and dialogue as well as welcoming challenge and conflict.
3. The book study team members must be willing to share their opinions and experiences in the spirit of team dialogue.
4. The book study team processes are "shared endeavors" and not lectures. The diversity of opinions and experiences makes a book study team more effective.
5. The book study team must address the questions found in the Book Study Team Guide Sheet (See Figure 1).

## Action Planning As a Process to Take Action

Action plans resulting from a book study team need to specify the actions that address each of the issues raised in the book. However, the purpose of an action plan is to help leaders put new knowledge to work. The guiding question addressed is "how can the book's major concepts or strategies impact our practices or culture in our school/district?" Action planning needs to be an ongoing process throughout the book study process. (See Figure 2).

## Conclusion and Implications

The book study strategy has become a major underpinning of our field-based partnership for developing leaders. While the book study teams are still a "work in progress," the faculty are excited about the initial results.

**Figure 1**  
**Book Study Team Sheet**

*Directions:* The following study sheet is designed as a guide to help the team record their progress on the book being discussed. The team needs to record their findings by answering the following questions:

**A. We agree on the following concepts/ideas/practices from the book:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

**B. We disagree on the following concepts/ideas/practices from the book:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

**C. We believe that the following ideas or practices will work in our building/district:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

**D. The general concepts that could be developed into an action plan are:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

**E. Things we want to continue to discuss on Blackboard and/or e-mail before our next meeting:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 2**  
**Book Study Action Plan**

Concept	Strategies	Personnel	Outcome	Date	Evaluation

The broad implications for book study teams in school districts go well beyond what the Kansas State-Marysville-Rock Creek partnership has generated to date. Both superintendents who co-teach the courses have already planned to continue books study programs well beyond the life of the academy. Book study teams can:

1. Become an effective process for school improvement.
2. Become a way to study new professional materials, and build a shared vision in the school building/district.
3. Become a major strategy for creating teams that engage in meaningful dialogue.
4. Become a method to help faculty and staff clarify their priorities in learning and teaching, and;
5. Encourage broad-based dialogue throughout the school district on issues that impact teaching and learning or any issue being considered.

Book study teams can become one of the major strategies for changing the face of education in the next few decades. Developing formal and informal leadership in schools through dedicated study of critical of books is an idea of great merit. As the old leadership adage goes, "how you lead depends on what you read."

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## Commentary

# Curriculum Content, Placement, and Alignment: From Textbooks to Education Standards and Assessments

Weldon F. Zenger and  
Sharon K. Zenger

The dominant role of textbooks in curriculum planning and development as well as in content grade placement and alignment goes without question. It has been common for textbooks to be the basic subject matter content in many school systems. That dominant role is changing. Education standards of one type or another and the assessment of those standards are beginning to dominate content selection, placement and alignment in the curriculum. This is happening at all levels: national, state, and local. It appears that textbooks will play a major part in the implementation of these education standards, however, in a more supportive than dominant role, which will affect the development of course and lesson plans.

### Thirty-Year Search

In the early 1970s, these authors began to search for a process to evaluate and select textbooks. Educators and educational associations at all levels as well as textbook publishers throughout the country were contacted. As a result of this study, a book was published entitled, *Evaluation and Selection of Textbooks* (Zenger and Zenger 1976). Through the research and writing of that book, these writers developed respect and appreciation for the extremely difficult task publishers encounter when publishing textbooks including the selection and placement of content in the curriculum. Finding this so difficult but important for school curriculum development, these researchers began the search for how subject matter content is and has been placed at particular grade levels in the past, who decided, when it was decided, and what specific content criteria were used to make that determination.

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This part of the study began in the mid-1980s and is continuing at the present time. However, sometime during the mid-1990s, something new began to appear in the search for how content is placed and aligned in school curricula. That something new was education standards and the assessment of those standards. The origin of this standards movement probably goes back to the national reports of the 1980s such as *A Nation at Risk*; however, the influence and domination of education standards on school curricula is a recent phenomenon.

### Textbooks Sometimes Criticized

A word in defense of textbooks and textbook publishers seems in order before moving to the standards movement. These writers, with 70 years of combined teaching experience from elementary through graduate school levels, have found textbooks for the most part appropriate, accurate and professionally written. Textbooks can be lifesavers for beginning teachers or those teachers who have four, five, six, or more subjects and grades for which to prepare. However, for textbooks to include content to meet the needs of everyone as well as many other requirements is almost impossible, i.e., some states have numerous form and format directives publishers must meet before textbooks can even be considered for adoption in those states. Considering all that is involved in publishing textbooks, publishers have done and continue to do a good, if not a great, job with a most difficult task. And as will be noted later, textbooks are not leaving the educational scene.

Textbook publishers seem to agree that education standards, especially state standards, dominate curriculum development. Peter Jovanovich, Chief Executive Officer of Pearson Education, states it very clearly:

"The process is straight-forward and universal. Publishers decide on a sequence of instruction based on the statewide or local curriculum guidelines and assessments. Those scope and sequence documents prepared by state departments of education and the statewide assessments determine what is taught and when. Publishers adhere to these standards rigorously." Peter Jovanovich (personal letter to authors, April 28, 1999).

Also, publishers are responding to this change from textbooks to education standards for placing content in the curriculum by including content in textbooks based on the standards and assessments of as many states and even local school districts as possible. Indeed, a most difficult undertaking. However, by doing this, textbooks, in a more supportive than dominant role, will continue to be the primary instruments for instruction and implementation of these standards.

### Education Standards and Assessments Dominate Content—But Textbooks Still the Major Source of Instructional Materials

Education standards and the assessment of those standards is the dominant force driving educational planning and development at all levels: national, state, and local. The assessment (testing) of these standards makes them mandatory for local school districts. However, there is considerable disagreement among educators as to the appropriate use of education standards including their development, placement, and alignment in school curricula. This uncertainty about placement of education standards in the curriculum can be expected, since there is no organized systematic plan or process for the placement (scope and sequencing) of content to school grade levels. The placement of content has been by textbooks, tradition, teachers'

expertise or favorite topics, professional judgment, current practice, craft knowledge-limited research, higher education requirements, etc. (Zenger & Zenger, 1997-98; Zenger & Zenger, 1999). These authors address education standards and curriculum content placement in an article entitled, "Why Teach Certain Material at Specific Grade Levels?" which was published in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, November, 2002. (Zenger & Zenger, 2002)

### Implications for Educators: Now and Immediate Future

So what does this mean for educational leaders, curriculum planners, and teachers? Dr. James Kenworthy, middle school principal, Manhattan Kansas, sees it as a complicated process:

"The standards movement only increases the complexity of the training that educators in the future face. Educational institutions will most likely need to restructure their training programs to include a whole course devoted to understanding and using these curricular standards. Local school districts also will need to provide staff development opportunities for the current classroom teachers." Dr. James Kenworthy (personal interview with authors, Manhattan, Kansas, August 3, 2001).

Regardless of the information and specific preparation educators receive about the standards movement, they have no choice but to incorporate education standards and assessments into the course of study. This is necessary to show academic accountability for both themselves and their students. First, they must identify and be certain to include the content of standards which are to be tested. Next, they have to develop or acquire instructional materials specifically including as much of that content as possible. Since textbook publishers are making a special effort to include instructional material for the content of as many education standards as possible, textbooks will probably be the best single source available. This means that textbooks will continue to serve one of the major, if not the major, functions (instruction) for school curriculum planning and development. Curriculum and instruction based on education standards and assessments (high stakes testing) may not be the best way of teaching and educating students; but for the present time, that is the process being used in an attempt to show educational accountability.

### Summary

Curriculum content as well as its placement and alignment to grade levels (a function once dominated by textbooks) is changing to education standards and assessments. This is especially true at the state and local levels. Textbooks, though sometimes criticized, have done a good job with a most difficult task and appear to be preparing for a major role in the standards movement. As curriculum planners and teachers incorporate education standards into the course of study, instructional materials including content for those standards will be required. Textbook publishers are attempting to meet this need by developing textbooks based on as many education standards as possible. This will make textbooks the major source for curriculum materials in the education standards movement, the same as they have been in the past. Although they no longer dominate content and its placement in the curriculum, textbooks, in all probability, will remain the dominant source for instructional materials and will be a major force in the implementation of these recent education standards. Educational leaders and curriculum planners will, of course, want to analyze the education standards in textbooks being considered for

adoption and determine whether or not those standards meet the needs of their curricula.

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